

## “Surrounded”

Acts 17:22-31, I Peter 3:13-22, Jn 14:15-21  
Easter 6, Hope Church, April 27, 2008, Lynn Japinga

Before the Acts reading: The apostle Paul has been preaching the gospel in various parts of Asia Minor. The gospel message “turns the world upside down” and Paul is frequently put in prison, or manages to leave town just in time to avoid punishment. In this passage he has come to Athens which is the center of learning and philosophy. Many smart people live here, and they spend their time debating ideas. They are willing to listen to Paul, and he gave a speech that went something like this.

So did the art work catch your eye? When my husband saw the bulletin last night, he wondered what this week’s feminist agenda was going to be! But this is not a sermon on feminine or maternal images of God. About a month ago I did a little advance prep work with the sermon texts and read the Acts passage about how in God we live and move and have our being. About a week later one of my students turned in a journal and included this painting as an example of an image of God.

The painting is titled “The love embrace of the universe.” The artist, Frida Kahlo, is pictured in the center of the painting, holding her husband in a Madonna-like pose. Surrounding them is the Aztec earth mother. And surrounding them all, plus various aspects of nature, is the universal mother, portrayed here with one brown arm and one white arm.

I was intrigued by how well this painting illustrated the text for today, “in God we live and move and have our being.” So let’s think for a bit about the text and then we’ll come back to the painting.

When the apostle Paul came to a new town, he often went to a synagogue and told the Jewish worshippers about the good news of Jesus. But in Athens Paul was talking to

Greek philosophers. They knew nothing about the Old Testament or how God had shown God's care for the world through the Jewish people. So Paul tried to connect to their culture. The Greeks were a very religious people, in a way. They had a god or goddess for the weather, for fertility, for crops. They had gods for war and gods for love. Each god or goddess had its own temple. And in case they missed one, there was a temple for the unknown god. So Paul focused on that one.

There is a God behind and above all these other gods. This God is not made out of gold by human hands and does not live in a temple. Instead, this is the God who made the world and all the people in it. God designed us so that we would seek after God. That's what the Greeks have been doing with all their philosophical discussions. But you don't have to work so hard to find God, Paul said to the Greeks. God is not a mysterious puzzle to be solved. God is near us. To prove his point, Paul quoted a Greek poet who had written, "In God we live and move and have our being."

Paul is saying two things to these Athenian people which seem contradictory. First, Paul says, God is much bigger than you think. God cannot be confined to these little temples. God does not simply take care of crops or thunder or water. God created the whole world. And here the educated philosophers would have cheered him on. The common people might have believed in the gods, but the thinkers knew that worshipping the fertility goddess did not make the crops grow. The philosophers preferred to think of God as a distant being who did not get involved in the petty squabbles and concerns of the people. But Paul said, that's not right either. God is much closer than you think. God is not a distant deity in heaven. God created the world, and continues to give it life and breath. God is surrounding you, if only you would see.

That was the good news for the Athenians and it can be good news for us as well. We live and move and have our being in God. We are surrounded by God's presence and care. We are held in the embrace of God just as Frida Kahlo painted herself embraced by the divine.

We are part of a chain of caring and compassion. When you look at this painting, perhaps you see yourself in the artist holding someone she loves. Like her, we hold our children and our spouses and our parents and our friends. And we are held by a broader community of compassion, the church. And we are all held by God. And maybe that means we can breathe a little easier. We are NOT the outside circle. When we see our limits as parents, for example, when we cannot provide everything for our children, we can trust that our children are being held by a bigger set of arms. They are held by the community, and they are held by God.

Maybe you look at this painting and think that while you were once held in this tender way, that you are no longer. Your spouse, your parent, your friend is gone. And then perhaps it can be of some comfort to remember that you are surrounded by the compassionate love of the Christian community, and the compassionate love of God.

And all of this can be affirming and encouraging. We are surrounded by God.

But this text says that we are also surrounded by God's people. Because God has not just created those who are Christians or Americans. From one ancestor, God made all people of every nation. That means that all people live and move and have their being in God. And that means all people are surrounded in the loving embrace of God.

Fannie Lou Hamer was an African American woman who became involved in the civil rights movement in Mississippi in the 1960s. She registered to vote, and for that

terrible crime she was fired from her job, because black people just didn't do that in Mississippi. She helped encourage other people to vote, and for that terrible crime she was brutally beaten. She gave a speech once where she quoted this verse ... that from one ancestor God has made all nations.

Some people are called to address those big questions of violence and abuse. Most of us are called on a smaller scale to find ways that we can be part of that chain of caring for all of God's offspring.

We are celebrating the Children's Sabbath today because we recognize that while it is essential to surround our own children with love and generosity, we are also called to care for all of God's children. There are many ways that we can do that.

Maybe you volunteer for Kid's Hope, or serve in some other way as a mentor or tutor or caregiver for children.

Maybe you help care for children here at Hope church, by volunteering in the nursery or teaching Sunday School or working with the youth group.

Maybe you offer financial support to the Boys and Girls Club, or the Community Foundation, or the Community Action House, or one of the many agencies that is helping children.

Maybe you are a teacher or a social worker or a lawyer who is trying to make policies which make life better for children.

Maybe you create a home where the friends of your children like to be. Maybe you are a gracious and loving parent who can embrace other children in addition to your own.

We are surrounded by the gracious loving care of God. The love embrace of the universe. In God we live and move and have our being. And there is a purpose for that. We are surrounded so that we can in turn surround others with the love embrace of the universe. Our children and others whom love. But there is room for more. We can embrace many people. Just as we know we have been cared for by a large community, so we can expand our embrace to surround others.