

My son, Carl, loves to study mythology. In fact, he recently did a huge project on Greek Gods and Goddesses. One day he asked me a very, very good question. He asked me, “Why do we call the stories from the ancient Greek religion myths? Is Christianity a myth, too?”

OK, now here was one of those moments I felt glad I’d gone to seminary!

Although there are many thick, hard to read books on theology, comparative religion and the origins of Christianity, as usual, Paul the first theologian, helps put this into perspective. In fact, today’s reading from Acts records a day about two thousand years ago, when Paul was standing right in the heart of ancient Greece – in Athens – in front of the Areopagus – the hill of the God Ares - where the Greeks held court, and where nearby was a huge temple to Dionysus. A few verses before we came into the story this morning, the book of Acts says:

A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with Paul. Some of them asked, “What is this babbling trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean.” (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

Well, yes, the Greeks were known for considering ideas. They were hungry for ideas! They were well known for their ongoing curiosity and were always trying to seek further – to further refine and define truth and reality in a way that could somehow sum it all up. Just think of all those Greek philosophers – thinking all day long and then thinking some more! While visiting Athens, Paul had noticed a temple that was dedicated “To an Unknown God.” I guess they figured they’d built temples to all the Gods they knew, maybe they’d better build one to the ones they hadn’t discovered yet, just to make sure all the bases were covered. But when Paul saw this, he praised them for their faith. Imagine, he said, building a whole temple to what you do not know. I can see that you understand that there is ultimately a God that is unsearchable and mysterious. That is the God we Christians worship! (You see, Paul was starting to make what he hoped would be a persuasive argument.)

Then Paul goes on to say that greater than any minor god – or even Olympian God – is the one God who created everything that is. This awesome God is far too big to live in shrines or statues, no matter how grand they are. We can never even hope to understand a God this vast. But yet, Christians believe that the great unknown God is not far away on some mountain we’ll never visit. No, the great unknown God is not far from each one of us at all. For “In him we live and move and have our being,” Paul said, using words that would have been familiar to the Greeks from their own poetry. The thing you’re searching for – that unknown idea you are always trying to grasp – the unknown answers to all of life’s most vexing questions – the unknown God that clearly you already know you revere – is made known to Christians through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This immense God has sent a human being – to become for us the image of the invisible God. And in his light, we see light!

To get back to Carl’s question: the word myth comes from the Greek word “mythos”, which means “story.” And the idea of mythology was explained very well in a book my son brought home from the school library. It said, “Sometimes the word myth is used for something people believe that is not true, as in “It is a myth that if you cross your eyes too often they’ll stick that way.” But mythology is not a collection of lies; it is a collection of truths. Myths are collections of complex stories that explore rather than explain. They are stories that show the human mind searching to balance the forces of creation and destruction, of life and death.”

And Paul shared some Christian stories of Jesus' resurrection with the Greeks. And the book of Acts tells us: When they heard about the raising of the dead, some scoffed; others said, "we will hear you on this subject some other time." So Paul left the assembly. Some joined him and became believers, including Dionysius, a member of the Council of Areopagus; and also a woman named Damaris, with others besides.

So, some of them dismissed Paul and his stories of salvation – they just didn't click at all for them. Some of them, in their very philosophically Greek way, dispassionately weighed what he had to say and told him they'd like to hear more later – so that they could continue to consider these new ideas. But a few of them felt so moved by the stories of this man Jesus, they went with Paul as believers. The stories of Jesus do reach out and call some of us to want to hear more – to delve deeper. I believe that there are some that are definitely called to the unseen God through the person of Christ – to good shepherd. And his sheep know his voice.

Christians are no different than all other human beings. We still need to make sense of the forces of creation and destruction, of life and death, just like anyone else. And the stories that define our faith as Christians are stories about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But these stories do more for us than give us interesting things to think about. In the Gospel reading this morning Jesus said, "Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." The stories of the Christian faith are different than other religions in that they locate the action of God not far away in the sky or down in the depths of the sea or in an underworld, not in any specialized Gods with unique skills or powers, and not in ourselves and our own willingness to obey God or abandon our egos or do anything at all. In the Christian faith, the action of God is seen in a relationship – a relationship between God and Christ, Christ and us, all of us with the spirit and all of us with each other. Jesus says, "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." Christianity is a religion in which the unknown God – the awesome creator of all that is – is honored primarily by the way we honor one another in relationship and is made visible to us through relationship. The all powerful and ever living God is made visible and present among us when we love one another as Christ loves us.

No icon, statue, building, song, liturgy, story – or even collection of stories can ever completely capture the full truth that is hidden in the stunning mystery of God, but for Christians, entering into a relationship with the person of Jesus Christ brings transformation and a whole new relationship with all that is for those who believe in him.

O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*