Last week, I shared the story of my friend and college roommate Jon, and how, when he pressed me, I admitted that I believed he was not going to be saved because he wasn’t a Christian. I know I am not alone in having held that belief. For centuries, that is what the Church has taught us: that we are Christians are the sole beneficiaries of salvation, and that it is our job to convert others to our set of beliefs so that they, too, might be saved.

Perhaps that was what Paul believed when he arrived in Athens. We know some of the pantheon of gods worshiped by the Greeks: Zeus and Hera; Artemis and Apollo; Ares, Demeter, Athena and Hephestus; and so many others. Statues and altars to each of these gods could be found in abundance throughout the Greek territories—which is why Jews like Paul thought these people to be heathen idolators. The Bible has lots to say about idolatry, and none of it good. Idolatry seems to be the one thing that gets God genuinely angry.

So imagine Paul’s surprise when, walking through Athens, Paul finds an altar dedicated to “an unknown god.” We might think that this is the byproduct of a culture that worships so many gods that they can’t even remember all their names; but Paul saw something else. He saw in this altar the mark of a culture and a people who recognized the work of the divine in the world and, though they worked very hard to name and venerate it, they also recognized that the divine is greater than their attempts to describe it. Perhaps Paul had come to Athens believing that he was bringing the God of Abraham and Isaac to the Greeks; imagine his surprise, then, when he found that God was already there ahead of him.

This is one of the central themes of the book of Acts: as Christians gather and proclaim the good news, people flock to join them; and when they go out seeking to bring in more people, they find that God is already there ahead of them. Peter learned that when he met Cornelius, a Gentile with no ties to the Jewish God. Apollos, a Gentile convert, became an apostle before he was even baptized. They practically had to tie him down and douse him with water so that they could approve of his ministry. The story of Acts is the story of the Church finding God in new places again and again, and each time they think they have God figured out, they soon find that God is always one step ahead of them, always standing on the outside of the boundaries they have drawn around the Church.

The prophet Isaiah writes: “Truly, you are a God who hides yourself.” (45.15) Not that God is hidden, hard to find and must be searched for; not that God chooses to remain hidden, cloaked in mystery or secrecy. No, God actively chooses to hide God’s ownself from us. As much as we would like a God of easy answers and obvious presence, we worship a God who gives us neither, who instead actively hides from us in order that we might wonder.

We treat God as if this were not the case: we boil our sacred scriptures down to a list of rules to follow or precepts to believe in; we render it down to 10 commandments or 5 steps to salvation or 1 simple truth to believe, and in so doing we distill the life out of it until it is nothing more than another supplement to take alongside our multivitamins and fish oil and weight loss pills. We want so desperately to believe that the mysteries of the universe have simple, finite answers that will be revealed in the fullness of time that we can’t fathom that perhaps life—and the God who created it—are too large and complex to ever be fully understood.

Which is perhaps why God chooses to hide Godself. A God who is not hidden—who is plainly and obviously present—is not a god; that god is a vending machine to whom we pay our respects and prayers and devotions and receive blessings in return. That god is a force of nature to be plied and appeased, manipulated and controlled; for since we know all there is to know about that god, we know exactly what to do in order to get that god to do what we want. In other words, the god that is obvious and plain is an idol, not unlike the idols to Zeus and Hera, Ares and Adonis and all the rest. And perhaps, that is how Paul was able to recognize the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in an altar dedicated “to an unknown god.”

That altar showed Paul that the Greeks were not idolators, as he may have supposed, but people just like him, groping for God with fish scales covering their eyes, open to the possibility that perhaps God was more complex than they could imagine. Suddenly, all those altars with graven images were not idols, but incomplete ways of experiencing and attempts at describing something ineffable, something so mysterious that it cannot be fully known.

Our God is a God who hides Godself, you see, not in an attempt to be obscured from us, but in order to be revealed to us. We worship a God who hides divinity in humanity, a God who hides the light that is the life of the world in darkness and death on a cross, a God who hides good news in the foolish and unbelievable story of a rabbi who changed water to wine, multiplied loaves and fishes, and rose from the dead.

Because God hides from us, God can be revealed to us almost anywhere. Jesus tells his disciples today that he is going to be hidden from them; but that when he is hidden, he himself—and the God who abides in him—will become even more fully known. He promises them that when he sends the next Advocate, his friends will know her because, although she is yet to arrive, she already abides in them. This is not the work of a God who can be simply or fully understood.

Because God hides from us, although we can speak with confidence about those things which God neither desires nor condones—things like suffering and pain and death—we can nonetheless see God revealed in those things, because even in those things, God is hidden. Anyone can see God’s majesty in the beauty of the sunrise or hear God’s joy in the laughter of a child; but God can only be revealed in a cancer diagnosis or a divorce or a pandemic or a sealed tomb through the abiding relationship that Jesus talks about.

Because God abides with Paul in Christ, Paul was able to see God hidden in the anonymous altar in Athens and because he saw that God was already there, he was able to not only teach the Athenians something new about this hidden God, he was able to learn something new about the same God himself. If the Source of All Life can be hidden in death, cannot the God made known in Christ also be revealed in Muhammad, or Moses, or Krishna or Buddha? That is what we mean when we say Christ is the only way: Christ is all ways.

Where else might we see this Hidden God revealed? Perhaps one of the most important places to look right now is in the COVID-19 pandemic. While some might be tempted to say that this is a test sent by God to strengthen us or a punishment sent to correct us, I am under no such delusion that the answer is so simple. This pandemic is bringing death and suffering to millions; it is stoking the fires of fear and xenophobia; and it is putting stress on our already tenuous society fractured as it is by poverty and oppression and polarization. And yet, it is also teaching us the value of community; it is clearing our skies and our waters in a way we have not experienced in decades; it is bringing our attention to problems that we must solve and offering solutions we have not been creative enough or brave enough to consider before now.

Both of these things are true, and neither of them justifies the other; such is the complex nature of the Hidden God. For example, our congregation would unquestionably prefer to be worshiping in person on Peacock Hill Avenue right now; and yet, how many of you are here with us this morning because we are not? How many people are able to engage with this worshiping community because we are on YouTube and not in a building? Both of these things are true: that our community is diminished by not being gathered physically, and that it is strengthened by this new way of being Church together. One truth does not justify the other, but both truths reveal God at work.

In this pandemic Easter season, the crucified-and-risen Christ is teaching us something new about the God we have always known. We are learning what it means to recognize God in the cross as well as in the empty tomb. Death is not just the necessary evil to get to what lies beyond, it is a part of the good creation God has made. The novel coronavirus is as much a creature of God as you or I; we cannot know this God apart from the virus, just as Paul could not know God apart from the witness of the Athenians.

Perhaps one thing this teaches us is that God’s salvation doesn’t always look like we imagine it will; but that doesn’t mean that God is not acting for salvation. Remember Jesus’ opening words in this discourse from last week: “Trust God, and trust me.” Just because we don’t see God doesn’t mean God isn’t here, working through everything that happens; it simply means that God is hidden. That hiddenness is good news for us, because it means that there is nothing—and no one—that cannot or will not reveal the love of God to us; not even pandemic, crisis or death. We have not been orphaned. The one who has left us is coming to us, and is already here. We know him, and we have seen him. Trust him, and trust God.