

NUMINOUS 5: SEEING GOD IN UNEXPECTED PLACES
MARS HILL – ACTS 17
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I want to tell you a story about a donkey. It's not my story. It's actually a French movie that premiered in 1966. The movie is titled *Balthazar, at Random*. Balthazar is the name of the donkey and for 90 minutes, you see his life, which could be best described as "at random." You watch for 90 minutes as this donkey is gifted to a little girl but then is sold and passed between several people through the course of the movie. Through these random events, Balthazar often suffers at the hands of malicious people and unintended consequences. Included in this journey, Balthazar goes from the pet of a loving little girl to working for a baker's abusive son, to working in a circus with the town drunk. Eventually he returns to the little girl only to be stolen by the abusive baker's son and used for an illegal smuggling operation wherein he is shot and dies in an empty field.

Not your usual Friday night movie at the Cineplex, but it does sound very French. It is quite serious and quite hard to watch. The abuse Balthazar suffers is quite difficult to watch as he is beaten, burned and ultimately dies alone from a gunshot wound. You see the worst in humanity and watch as the donkey takes all of this abuse and then he dies. It doesn't leave you feeling great about humanity. This isn't a Disney movie. This isn't the donkey from *Shrek*. This is a French movie about the hard journey of a donkey and his ultimate death. I'm sure all of you are planning as we speak, how do I get my hands on a copy of *Balthazar, at Random*? What is the point of such a difficult movie? What does it mean? Why would anybody make it?

These are the same questions that surfaced when it originally premiered in New York City in 1966. People hated it. They thought it was boring and sparse. They didn't like seeing the donkey getting abused and they felt it was pointless. Then counter points began to emerge. Noted critics began to call it a masterpiece. They said it was one of the finest works of art ever. They said it encapsulated the human condition in 90 minutes. They said it shook them to their very souls and made them consider God. A story about a donkey shook them to their soul and explained the human condition?

Art can be like that. It can make you scoff and say, “I could have done that,” but sometimes it makes you consider the divine. It makes you think about your purpose and meaning in life. The movies, art and music that are often divisive can lead to these polar opposites in feelings. This leads to the bigger question, can you see God in art/movies/books/poetry? It’s really a matter of who is looking and what they can see.

We are in the last week of our series, *Numinous*, and I want to show you another seemingly non-Christian story about some animals that was used to point people to Jesus. We have endeavored upon this idea of the numinous in order to see God in unexpected ways, through unexpected people in unexpected places, and that is true today. We are going to look at one of the more peculiar stories of the New Testament when Paul preaches at Mars Hill. You might have read this text before, but there is a decent chance you didn’t see it’s true meaning. You probably missed out on the fact that Paul uses pagan legends and pagan poetry to point to Jesus, so our numinous journey concludes looking for God in art, specifically art that doesn’t seem obviously Christian.

Acts 17:22-34

Paul is going to do something interesting. In past episodes, he has preached Jesus using the Old Testament scriptures as his proof, but these people probably haven’t heard of Jesus and they don’t know the Old Testament. What does Paul do? Does he preach about Jesus? No. Does he preach about the Old Testament? No. He preaches about Epimenides. Epimenides was a pagan poet from 600 years before Paul and Jesus. More on that in a moment, but let me set the context for you.

In the previous verses, Paul finds himself in unfamiliar territory. Paul strolls into Athens. Athens by this time has been declared as a city past its prime. Around the time of Epimenides and for the next couple hundred years, Greece and its capital, Athens, were the hub of power, culture and religion. With the ascent of Rome as the major power, Athens did not completely fall off the map, but it was not what it used to be. Athens did have a couple things going for it. It was revered as an intellectual mecca. It would be analogous to mentioning something like Stanford or Harvard. People have a perception that goes with

those names and the same would be true for Athens. This was the case because men like Socrates and Plato had plied their crafts of philosophy in this very city, so it had a legacy for a great deal of education. It also had a legacy of worshipping multiple gods. While there was still the Parthenon and countless idols all over town, the people of Athens weren't really spiritual. They were religious. They were more known for tolerating all viewpoints and accepting multiple idols. Instead of embracing a singular truth, they thought it better to have tolerance for all viewpoints.

A legacy of education and religious tolerance. Does that sound like anywhere you are familiar with? Paul strolls into Athens, and he sees idols on every corner and every doorstep. He sees the Parthenon, because it is on top of the Acropolis, which is the high point of the city in Athens. Idols are everywhere, so he decides to preach.

It appears Paul wasn't planning on preaching, but he felt compelled to after seeing all of these idols. He is preaching in the marketplace, and he gets the attention of two religious groups who aren't really religious, the Epicureans and the Stoics. The Epicureans believed life was about limiting pain and maximizing pleasure. A good motto for them might be, "eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." The Epicureans believed in a god but really only in a conceptual fashion because they believed god was distant and uninvolved. They were essentially deists. The second group, the Stoics, believed that life was about working hard, seeking harmony and being self-sufficient. They were essentially humanists. Their view of god was also tied to their philosophy that if there were a god, it would be a pantheistic view of a god who was everywhere and in everything. These are two drastically different groups, and Paul is going to create a piece of art for them. The question is can they see God? It's about perspective.

So you have a city that is known for education and tolerance, and you have two groups within that city, pleasure seekers and harmony builders. Deists and humanists. Does this sound like anywhere you have heard of? These two groups hear Paul preaching about Jesus, and they invite him to share this new idea before the Areopagus. The Areopagus, also translated as Mars Hill, was known for being a court where things got sorted out. There is a large rock that marks the spot of the Areopagus, and when you face it, the Parthenon is

looming large above it. This was a place where trials took place, but not necessarily criminal trials more like a Supreme Court who ruled on the validity of big issues. Paul wouldn't be on trial per say with criminal charges, but his testimony would be weighed by the smartest people in town.

So back to his sermon. He preaches to this group about an unknown God. He doesn't use Old Testament scripture. He doesn't use general revelation. He references one of their idols and tells them that unknown God is indeed Jesus who was resurrected, but there is so much more to this story. I want you to know where this unknown god came from. This is where we really get to meet Epimenides.

Six hundred years before Jesus, a man named Epimenides lived in Athens. Epimenides was a religious man and a poet. He faithfully sought to lead people to worship the gods correctly.

Six hundred years before Jesus, a plague was sweeping through the city of Athens. This plague was a sickness that affected thousands and was debilitating the entire city. The people were sacrificing to the pantheon of polytheistic gods in hopes that they would be healed, but nothing was working, so a man named Epimenides had a great idea. He let loose a pen full of sheep and followed the sheep until they laid down close to the temple or altar of a god. When this happened, wherever the sheep laid down, they would sacrifice the sheep to appease that god. The sheep were released and many gathered together and laid down around different temples, and they sacrificed the attending sheep to whatever god they stopped in front of. However the story goes that one sheep stopped in a random field far from any of the temples, and he laid down. Just so they covered all of their bases, they sacrificed that lamb in that place and set up this altar to an unknown god. As the story goes, the people of Athens were miraculously healed from their plague, so they kept and honored this altar to an unknown god. They had offered sacrifices to the other gods to no avail, but the sacrificial lamb who laid down before an unknown god healed them.

This same Epimenides also wrote a poem about the gods. He wrote one that was famous and well known that went like this:

*They fashioned a tomb for thee, O Holy One
The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies
But thou are not dead; thou livest and abides forever
For in thee we live and move and have our being.*

This revered man did at least two significant things that were acknowledged 600 years later. He sacrificed a lamb to an unknown god and the people were healed, and he wrote a poem about a resurrected God in whom we live, move and have our being.

Both the pagan story and the pagan poem are central to Paul's Christian sermon. The same sermon where he never mentions Jesus by name. The same sermon wherein he doesn't lay out the Roman Road, mainly because he hasn't written it yet. He just takes a regular story from the culture and points to Jesus from it.

Let's return to our donkey story. In 1973, after Balthazar's movie became critically praised and adored, the director and writer of the movie gave an interview and said this:

"There is the feeling that God is everywhere, and the more I live, the more I see that in nature, in the country. When I see a tree, I see that God exists. I try to catch and to convey the idea that we have a soul and that the soul is in contact with God. That's the first thing I want to get in my films."

The author of the donkey movie said that every movie he makes is about connecting people to God, including a donkey that gets manhandled by humanity and eventually killed by humanity. When it comes to Balthazar, you have to look closer. You see the beginning of the movie when he is gifted as a pet to the little girl that they sprinkle water on him and baptize him. As you watch Balthazar get handed from person to person at random, you realize the suffering he undergoes happens at the hands of people committing one each of the seven deadly sins. When you look really closely, you see Balthazar suffer throughout the movie

and the end is simple and profound. With a bullet wound in his side, Balthazar stumbles upon a herd of sheep. While the sheepdogs bark at him and seemingly mock him, he falls down and dies in the middle of the sheep.

Maybe it's just a story about a donkey. Maybe Epimenides' story is just a story about a lamb who was slain to take away the plague upon the people of Athens. It's a matter of how you see it. It's really a matter of perspective.

Passages like this and movies like this are why I love art, books and movies. There is something divine there if you are willing to see it. In the course of my five and a half years here, I've talked a lot about movies and art and books in my sermons, so much so that some people have complained. Why is he preaching about a TV show called *Breaking Bad* or *The Walking Dead*? Why does he ask Bill to sing songs like *The Boxer* by Paul Simon or a musical like *Hamilton*? Why does he so often quote people who aren't Christian or tell stories that aren't Christian. This is why.

Because of Balthazar. Because of Epimenides. Because I think God can be found out there in our stories. If we are willing to look. This works because Jesus often told stories. He didn't give long didactic sermons with ten bullet points. "God is all-loving. God is all-good. God is forgiving. Any questions?" No, he tells stories about fathers looking for lost sons. He tells stories about Samaritans caring for people they should consider enemies. He tells stories about a king inviting everyone to the dinner table. Jesus allowed people to see God in his stories.

Here is what I want you to see in this story. Sometimes the gospel needs to be contextualized. Sometimes we have to build a bridge. God has woven a desire for eternity into the hearts of mankind and has spread breadcrumbs of the gospel everywhere to lead people to Jesus. Sometimes, we need to make sure and speak the language of those to whom we are speaking. For our fast-paced Silicon Valley culture that is often post-Christian (meaning they have no rooting in the story of the Old Testament or the New Testament), that means we need to remove the "Christianese" from our language.

Consider your language and consider alternate means to broaching faith other than giving someone a tract. While that may be sometimes useful, you might think about starting a book club with books that are substantive that provide bridges to conversations about grace. Maybe you have a movie night and watch a film and discuss themes like sacrifice and meaning.

Lest you think this is all a roundabout way of discussing Jesus, I want you to know the underlying theology that makes this approach work. It is called common grace. Common grace is different from saving grace. Saving grace is that moment where one receives God based on the work he did for you and you pass from death to life. Common grace is the good things that God bestows on all of creation that blesses all people regardless of whether they have been saved or not. A part of this understanding is that since we are created in the image of God and are born in his image, there is no distinction between secular and sacred. God's truth can bubble up sometimes through an unlikely source. A piece of art might not be a Christian movie like *Facing the Giants* or *Fireproof*, but it might have eternal truths in it that can be bridges to life. You don't always have to point people to a Christian book or a Christian movie. Maybe you go with them to the recent number one movie in America, *Get Out*, and you discuss the problem of racism in our culture and what might be done about it. Or maybe you watch any movie produced by the Coen brothers because they all deal with the pursuit of large sums of money that end up tearing apart relationships and ending lives. God's truth is out there. The breadcrumbs are out there. All truth is God's truth, and there are bridges everywhere that can lead people to faith in Jesus.

Of course this all comes back to the ultimate piece of art. A moment in time that is sketched in many of our minds. At the end of the day, the cross and resurrection are the ultimate artistic expression of God. Not a sermon. Not a theological lecture, but a suffering servant hanging on a Roman cross. People will look at this man and this event and tell you ten different things. He was a good man who was killed for insurrection. He was a Jew who got on the wrong side of the Romans. He was a lunatic that confronted the wrong people. Then when it comes to the resurrection, some will say, it never happened. Others will say his body was stolen. Others will say he was never truly dead, but some will say, he is the lamb who laid down for me. He is the one who healed us from the plague of sin. You are not in

charge of changing hearts, but you are called to build bridges. To show them the art and ask them what they think.

I'll finish today with the final scene of *Balthazar, at Random*. It could just be a sad end to a sad life. It could just be a donkey movie with a bad ending. It could just be some sheep in a field with mean dogs barking at a dying donkey, or it could be more. Like a good docent, I will show you the art and let you decide.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JToByR14Q0Y>