

John Sampson
"The Known God"
Text: Acts 17:22 - 31
Preached at KVCC
May 21, 2017

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer. AMEN.

This morning I share with you one of my all-time favorite paintings.

It's this guy.

It's called *Black Square*, for obvious reasons. And it was painted by a Russian artist named Kasimir Malevich in 1913.

This reproduction is almost exactly the same size and dimension of the original. A smaller image of the painting is also reproduced in your bulletin.

Black Square is considered by many to be a masterpiece of modernism, although for some it may be proof that modern art really is a joke, and an indulgence of those who have nothing better to do with their lives.

But the influence of this painting can hardly be understated. Art movements such as Minimalism and Pop, artists as different as Mondrian, Jasper Johns, and Richard Serra have all been impacted by this painting's radical simplicity, and unfathomable meaning.

This painting is not only one of my favorite works of art. It is my favorite work of religious art because *Black Square* is an icon. And its influence in my spiritual life can hardly be understated.

In pre-Revolutionary Russia icons were understood to be doorways to the spiritual realm. They were not simply images of a saint, or

aspect of the Divine. They were not intellectual and aesthetic relics. Icons were experienced as the actual manifestation of heavenly presence in the world. For households that could afford an icon they would hang it not on a flat wall as we display our pictures, but up in the corner of the room near the ceiling looking down over the daily business of the home, the comings and goings of the family.

And this is how Malevich displayed *Black Square*. In the very first exhibit it was shown at, Malevich hung *Black Square* up in the corner of the room over all of the other paintings in the gallery. It assumed the place of the icon; it assumed the role of the gateway to heaven.

However, if *Black Square* is an icon, it is perhaps an icon to an unknown God. A God that seems both unremarkably mundane, and at the same time surprisingly inscrutable. This is an icon to a God that remains a darkness to our minds, and yet this God manifests itself right before us in the simplicity of a ordinary geometric form.

If *Black Square* is an icon it is an icon that so perfectly reflects our modern struggle to find God. Uneasy and restless in our deep need to reach beyond ourselves and connect with the Divine, we are met by an image that apparently has nothing to show us, and no response that can give comfort. In *Black Square*, in our pursuit of God, we can meet a cold and icy silence that seems to reject the very promise of God's love and commitment to us. This black square so perfectly captures our sense that God can be a contradictory Presence in our lives – a Presence that often feels more like an Absence.

But we unduly privilege ourselves if we think that our own struggle to find and connect with God is purely an effect of modernity, purely a characteristic of our post-Christian, post-humanist, post-industrial world.

Because Paul encountered the same longing and conflicted religious response centuries ago in Athens.

Traveling across the eastern Mediterranean to share the message of Jesus the Christ with all of those who would listen to him, Paul enters Athens. Athens, with its proud history of democracy, of art, culture and philosophy, is still a guiding light for our American republic. Its accomplishments still influence our dreams of what we would like our society to be. And yet the Athens that Paul entered was a city of deep spiritual insecurity. Filled with every temple to every god imaginable the citizens of that ancient city still crammed into the Areopagus to hear Paul share what he knew of a man and of a god they had never heard of before. Whatever was happening in their temples, whatever wisdom their philosophers shared, whatever the beauty of their art revealed, still they came away thirsty and hungering for something more.

And aren't we the modern Athenians?

America is filled with churches, and mosques, and synagogues and yet we seem not to know God, and continue to search for spiritual experience. We live surrounded by the insights and advances of science and technology and yet our rational intellects can't seem to deliver a thought or concept that quiets and comforts our intellectual unease. We have access not only to American achievements in the arts, but also to a vast and diverse constellation of global cultures, and yet we still desire a beauty that always seems to have turned its face from us.

In their doubt, in the midst of their unease, the Athenians erect an altar to an unknown god. This detail, this relatively small observation opens to us here today the opportunity to be unflinchingly honest about our own faith, and our own desperate need for the Divine in our lives.

Do we come here this morning to worship a god who remains unknown us?

Do we know nothing about Jesus and about the One who sent him, and yet come to this church in a hope beyond all hope that we still may somehow be blessed?

Have we stripped the altars of our minds and hearts of the stories of the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, the creation of humanity in God's image, and yet still come wishing to connect to a God we can no longer see?

Is coming before God like coming before this Black Square? An act of deep spiritual need mixed with a skepticism that any moment of revelation is actually possible?

“What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you,” says Paul.

But this morning I riff on Paul’s words and say to you, “What therefore you worship as unknown, *Black Square* will proclaim to you.” Because this black square shows us, just like Paul, that we have not only been looking in the wrong place to find God, but that we have put our trust in others instead of ourselves.

I am going to share a truth with you. It’s so simple, but it’s everything.

Are you ready for it?

Black Square is a black square.

That’s it. That’s all I got.

Black Square is a black square.

In this simple statement is revealed why this painting, why this great modernist icon, has the monumental status it has within the history of the art of the West. In this simple statement is also revealed why *Black Square* is perfectly calibrated to help reveal to our clouded spiritual eyes God's presence in the world.

Unlike every painting before it, unlike the picture of Paul preaching in Athens reproduced on the cover of our bulletin, *Black Square* doesn't point beyond itself. It is the thing that it pictures. In the image of Paul in the bulletin we look at a representation of Paul and we understand that it is a symbol for a specific man. It is not the man it refers to, but rather it signifies him. *Black Square* operates completely differently. It doesn't point to an external square. It is a

square. There is no duality in *Black Square*; there is no external reality it symbolizes. This square is a square.

If we allow ourselves to be given over to the influence of *Black Square's* dark and inky power this mysterious icon tells us that God isn't external to our world. She is embedded within it. She is right here, right now. This black square invites us not to see our scriptures as pointing to a beyond, to an exterior heaven that we can picture using the media of word and image and tradition. *Black Square* is a force of gravity, and it collapses heaven and earth into each other. In the blackness of Malevich's masterpiece there is no longer a signifier and a signified, a true square and the image of a square, a human one and a divine one. All binaries come together and there is only Unity.

Last week I invited the congregation, I challenged the congregation, to witness to where God is working in our lives, and to share what

we've seen and experienced with each other. And during the week I heard back from you.

Again, I riff on Paul. "What therefore you worship as unknown, this you proclaimed to yourselves."

It has been such a meaningful experience for me to be allowed into the intimate moments of your spiritual lives. For all of you who shared with me, thank you! You told me that you experienced God in the flowering of apple trees. You shared that you met God in the mountains while you hiked. You found God in the relationships you have with your sons and daughters.

You have given witness to the truth that God is not out there somewhere and we are over here somewhere else. Your own experience has given voice to the fact that heaven and earth are not separate. They are intertwined. They are lovers.

And this is what Paul is also giving witness to. He says that God isn't separated from us and contained in shrines, stored away and only to be found in holy places. He says that God is, "not far from each one of us," and more radically that, "we live and move and have our being," in the Divine. God is not exterior to us; she is Imminence. And she has bound herself to us in the journey of our lives.

In the shadow of the Black Square, in the radiance of Paul's words, in the truth of the witness of our lives, we learn that the silence and absence of God we experience and grieve may simply be a result of expecting to find God only in the Bible, only in the experiences of our spiritual ancestors, and only in a building like this one.

The tragedy of human existence is that we miss God's presence right in front of our eyes, living in our houses, reaching out to us in the touch of our loved ones, fighting with us as we argue with our work

mates. To fail to see God within the ordinariness of our lives, is to miss her. It is a blindness and a ignorance that is at the very root of our spiritual anxiety and starvation. And it is from this ignorance that Paul calls us to repent, to change the direction and focus of our lives so that we can see God embracing us in the here and now.

Although it may seem like a threat, Paul tells us that we will be judged. We will be judged by Jesus, by the man who was so flooded with God's presence, that there was no separation between human and Divine in his life. He lived awake to the fact that heaven was born within our world, and within our lives. And it is this man who will judge us by our ability to be awake to God's presence in our lives, and how we respond to what we have witnessed. This is no threat. This is God extending her hand to us in blessing.

And this blessing is that we no longer need to worship at the altar of an unknown god. We no longer need to fear that the only icon left to

us is the nihilism of a black square. We no longer need to fear that God exists disconnected and separate from our lives. Look into the depths of *Black Square*, look into the depths of your own lives and you will see that we don't worship at the altar of an unknown god.

We worship a known God, a God who stands right in front of us, a God in whom we live and move and have our being, a God who loves us and will never leave us.

AMEN.