What they fear

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The Areopagus--the former location of the Athenian equivalent of the Roman senate--was a center of civic life. The name comes from "Ares," the Greek god of war, and "pagos," which means "hill" or "rock." The Roman equivalent of Ares is Mars, hence the translation sometimes used: the Mars Hill.

In Paul's day, a section of the city of Rome was called the Campus Martius, or Mars Field, so named for the military training maneuvers that had taken place there and for the triumphs that were often held there. During the time of Emperor Augustus, an altar to Pax, the goddess of peace, was erected in the middle of the Mars Field. The architectural symbolism would have been lost on no one: the way to peace, said Rome, was through war.

This location belied the story that the Romans told about Pax's origin: she was supposed to have been the daughter of Iustitia, Lady Justice. People like Paul, John the Baptist and Jesus knew very well that the architecture was closer to the truth than the story was. For Rome, peace proceeded not out of justice but out of war and the continual application of violent power.

What were the Romans so afraid of that they spent so much time and energy controlling it? What empires are always afraid of: the people and their desire for good lives, fair treatment, security, food, justice.

"Do not fear what they fear," says the author of I Peter. Fear and love God first, and you will not be able to help but find yourself living lives of justice and mercy, beauty and dignity. And you yourself will become an altar of the peace that passes all

understanding.

May you love God so much that you love nothing else too much. May you fear God enough that you need fear nothing else at all.