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The Clues That God Leaves Us

Psalm 14:1, 19:1-11, Mark 9:23-24, Romans 1:20

In the last few years, several best-sellers have presented and pressed the case for atheism, claiming that a belief in God is naïve, delusional, or even dangerous. In 2004, Sam Harris wrote a book entitled, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason*. He tells of the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina and asks, "Almost every person living in New Orleans believed in an omnipotent, omniscient, caring and compassionate God, and yet more than a thousand died, tens of thousands lost all their earthly possessions, and nearly a million were displaced. What was God doing while a hurricane laid waste to their city? Surely he heard the prayers of good men and women who fled to their attics only to be slowly drowned. Only the atheist has the courage to admit the obvious: These poor people died talking to an imaginary friend."

In 2006, Oxford biologist, Richard Dawkins, wrote a book entitled, *The God Delusion*, in which he recalls how 19th century Anglican services inevitably contained prayers for the health of the British Royal Family. "Wouldn't you expect, then," he asks, "that the prayed-for royals would live long, robust lives!" But that isn't the case. In fact, many of the royals died prematurely. So what good were all these prayers?

And more recently, Vanity Fair columnist Christopher Hitchens has written, "*God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*." He laments the sectarian violence in Belfast, Beirut, Bombay, Belgrade, Bethlehem and Baghdad and asks, "If you were in a foreign city at dusk and saw a cluster of men walking towards you, would you feel safer or more frightened if you knew that they were coming from a prayer meeting?"

Each of us could compile our own list of questions: Why do so many Christians behave badly? I cringe every time Pat Robertson opens his mouth, or when I read that a group of Baptist missionaries tried to kidnap children from Haiti, or that a pro-life zealot gunned down an abortion provider in the narthex of his church.

But isn't it that H. Richard Niebuhr was right, "Religion makes good people better and bad people worse!" Isn't it true that character is molded in the context of love, good role models, security and intimacy, so if a Christian is raised in a dysfunctional and abusive setting, he or she may lack compassion and wisdom, and, at least to start with, of a well-adjusted atheist or agnostic! And just because someone calls themselves a Christian doesn't mean that they are. We're all fallen creatures, and we very imperfectly live out the challenge offered by the Apostle Paul,

As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each

other and forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them together in perfect unity.

Or we may ask with Hitchens: Hasn't the church too often been the source of incalculable harm and injustice? What excuse can we offer for the crusades, or the Spanish inquisition, or for how the Dutch South African church used Scripture's call for Israel to be separated from the Canaanites as a justification for apartheid?

But in fairness, while it is unconscionable that 1600 persons were killed during the Spanish inquisition, that number pales in comparison to the millions killed during the reigns of Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot or Saddam Hussein. Scripture condemns injustice and cruelty and, in fact, takes particular aim at those who claim to be God's chosen people while perpetrating harm to their neighbor in need. Isaiah declares,

Day after day they seek me; they seem eager to know my ways; they seem eager for God to come near . . . Yet on the day of your fasting, you exploit your workers. Here is the fasting I chose: to lose the chains of injustice, to set free the oppressed, to share your food with the hungry, and to give shelter to those who wander!

Scripture itself judges us by the standards of justice, mercy, compassion and love, calling us to live up to those high standards. So it was William Wilberforce's Christian faith that led him to fight slavery, and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s conviction that each of us is created in the image of God that launched the Civil Rights movement, and Mother Teresa's call from God that led her to spend her life serving the poorest of the poor.

What about those royals who suffered premature death, despite being the recipient of weekly and earnest prayer? Perhaps they should have exercised, eaten less cholesterol and imbibed more moderately. God gives us free will. We're free to live in a way that is healthy or unhealthy. We're free to build our homes on flood plains or on tectonic plates that may cause an earthquake. Our world is fallen. It rains on the just and unjust alike. Life is not always fair. God didn't suspend the law of gravity when I slipped on the snow and ice during a trail run, although when my race number that day was 666 . . . perhaps He was trying to send me a message.

During this season of Lent, Chuck and I will wrestle with some of these questions about which we all wonder. How can a loving God allow suffering? Why would a caring and compassionate God judge humanity? Why did Jesus die on the cross? After death, what then? Is there any proof of resurrection? And this morning I'm going to address the most basic question, Can we even know that God exists?

It is striking that Scripture offers no proof for God's existence. It simply declares, "God is!" "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." "The heavens declare the glories of God; day after day they pour forth speech." "Ever since God created the

world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal nature and divine power have been clearly seen." So perhaps we should think not of the question, "What proof is there for the existence of God," but rather of the clues or evidence God offers us.

I think of the times I've prayed in the midst of some crisis, and somehow despite the circumstances, I feel a calming presence that I can only call "the peace that passes understanding." I watch Haitians, emerging from villages that were reduced to rubble, still singing hymns of praise, or our brothers and sisters in Lisanjala, Malawi, where our sister church is located, living in poverty, and yet living joyful, radiant lives. Someone once told me, "When I stop praying, the coincidences stop as well." Not every prayer is answered in the way we wish, but when Jesus promises, "Ask and you shall receive," we will at least receive His presence. Can't each of us look back to occasions, where despite all odds, we received the mysterious gifts of peace, grace, hope and strength. None of these are proofs, but they are clues!

Scripture invites us to look at the wonders of creation, and the miracle of life itself. What caused the big bang, and the origin of our expanding universe? And what caused the intricate design of our common life? If I walk through a field and find a rock, that doesn't seem surprising. But if I walk through a field and find an ornate pocket watch, or an I-pod, or a cell phone, I assume those items have a creator.

Scientist Francis Collins speaks of the vast number of factors that had to be precisely correct in order for life to evolve – an orbit not too near or too far from the sun, an atmosphere with exactly the right composition, an ozone layer to protect us from radiation, a suitable gravity, various constants about the strong and weak nuclear force, a moon that is the perfect size and distance from the earth. The moon causes tides that prevent ocean water from stagnating, but yet those waters don't resemble a tsunami or tidal wave that would do damage.

Collins lists 15 factors that had to be precisely correct and concludes, "*If any of these constants was off by even one part in a million . . . the universe could not have come to the point where we see it. Matter could not have coalesced, and there would have been no galaxies, stars, planets or people.*" Creation possesses an order, a harmony, a consistency. Water will boil at 212 degrees F this afternoon and a century from now. This is not a proof for the existence of God, but it is a clue!

And doesn't the very message of the gospel, the story line of Scripture, show us both a portrait of life, and a way of understanding how to find meaning and purpose. We are each created in the image of God, thereby possessing dignity and value. But we are fallen, possessing a sinful nature that turns us in towards ourselves. Sin defiles and mars us; it invites us to put ourselves at the center of life, so our preoccupation is not with our neighbor in need, but with "what's in it for me?" Sin leads to power, control and violence. The story of Adam and Eve is followed by the story of Cain killing Abel.

I once spoke with a Viet Nam veteran who said, "Having witnessed so much bloodshed, so many heartbreaking stories, the innumerable victims of violence, I cannot believe in God." My response was, "It is not God who kills. What you witnessed broke God's heart and violates every commandment and teaching He gives. Jesus tells us, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God!" What you witnessed reveals why we need to turn to God, not turn from Him!

But God does not leave us in our brokenness and fallen nature. He sends His Son to bear our sins in His own body, to visibly demonstrate how life is to be lived, and to actually dwell within us helping us be transformed from the inside out. Jesus shows us that love is stronger than hatred, that forgiveness is more healing than revenge, that compassion is better than apathy. Jesus teaches us that "it is more blessed to give than to receive," that joy and meaning comes from serving helping our neighbor in need.

Isn't there a congruence between the contours of the gospel and how life is to be lived? Don't we sense how life gets bound up and distorted when our sin nature takes hold, but how we find hope and freedom when we hear the good news of our forgiveness in Jesus Christ? Don't we feel most alive, most hopeful, and most joyful when we are making a difference in the lives of others, which is precisely what the gospel teaches! None of this is a proof, but it is a clue!

And what about our experiences with God? I'm always fascinated by our faith stories, by the stories of what led us to Jesus and to a family of faith. Some of you may have a story like the one author Simone Weil tells in her book, *Waiting for God*,

In 1938 . . . I suffered from splitting headaches that felt like blows. So I often recited a poem that I loved, focusing all my attention on it. Without my realizing it, the recitation became a prayer. During one of my recitations, Christ himself came down and took possession of me. I thought the problem of God couldn't be resolved. I had never foreseen the possibility of real, person to person contact.

Our experiences with God's presence are not a proof, but when millions upon millions of us have such experiences, aren't they persuasive clues!

Faith, of course, isn't certainty. Most of us are like the man in the gospels whose son was in some manner "possessed." He asks Jesus for help, and in response to Jesus saying, "Everything is possible for the person who believes," the man cries, "I believe; help my unbelief!" That's us!

So when we doubt, what can we do? I like the story Tim Keller tells in his book, *The Reason for God*. He tells of a woman who prayed over and over during a dark time of her life, "God, help me find you." But God seemed distant. So a Christian friend suggested that she pray, "God, you're the Good Shepherd who finds lost sheep. Come

and find me." The woman told Keller, "I can tell you this story because – He did!"
Thanks be to God! Amen.