



**Matthew 27:35-46 (Psalm 22:1-5)**  
**“Evidence of God”**  
**Series: Religion & Science**  
**January 31, 2010**  
**First UMC-Jefferson City**  
**Daniel Hilty**

The year 1961 was a year of a lot of change—some of the change was important, and some of the change was not. In 1961, for instance, John F. Kennedy was inaugurated president, and Fidel Castro declared Cuba to be a Communist nation. In 1961:

<b>Media Event</b>	
(Please display graphic file, “Electric Toothbrush”)	

In 1961, the electric toothbrush was just being introduced to the world,

<b>Media Event</b>	
(Please display graphic file, “Airplane”)	

In 1961, the world’s first in-flight movie was shown during a TWA flight. It was “The Lost World,” by the way, which was a film about dinosaurs.

And perhaps most notably, 1961 introduced the world to this guy...

<b>Media Event</b>
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(Please display graphic file, "Mr. Ed")



Mr. Ed. The famous talking horse who had his very own TV show for a few years. Who here remembers Mr. Ed.—or, at least, the reruns?

You know, they actually tried a couple of spin-offs of the Mr. Ed series, but neither of them worked out very well. There was a series about a talking *female* horse, for example, named *Miss Ed*, but it came on much too late and nobody stayed up to watch. You might say it was a real *night-mare*.

And then, of course, they tried to do a series about a talking pony, but it didn't work either. It turned out that the pony actually had a lot of trouble talking, because—you know—the pony was a *little hoarse*.

No, sadly, Mr. Ed was the only one whose ratings remained *stable*.

All *horsing around* aside, however, most people agree that one of the most truly significant events of 1961 came on this date:

<b>Media Event</b>
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April 12, 1961
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Does anybody know—or would anybody like to guess—what happened on April 12, 1961?

April 12, 1961 is the date of the very first human being in outer space. Yuri Gagarin, from the Soviet Union, was the person who achieved it. On April

12, he boarded the Vostok 1 rocket, orbited the earth once in a little less than two hours, and returned home.

**Media Event**

(Please display graphic file, "Earth")



Now, as you might imagine, the view that Yuri Gagarin saw through the window of his ship took his breath away. He is quoted as saying, "the Earth is blue.... How wonderful! It is amazing!"

But in the years between now and then, Gagarin's orbit has also become known for what he did *not* see through the window of his ship. Because not much longer after Yuri Gagarin became the first human in space, Nikita Khrushchev, who was the leader of the Soviet Union at the time, gave a famous speech to the Central Committee of the Communist Party there, in which we purportedly said,

**Media Event**

"Gagarin flew into space, but didn't see any God there."

[DANIEL READS TEXT.] Now, interestingly enough, Yuri Gagarin's friends have actually since tried to distance him from this statement. They said that Gagarin was a baptized member of the Orthodox Church, and that he never said anything even remotely like this.

But Nikita Khrushchev said it, and it has been a part of the story of that first space flight ever since. "Gagarin flew into space, but didn't see any God

there.” Or to put it another way, Khrushchev was looking for *evidence of God* out there in the great beyond. He was asking the question:

<b>Media Event</b>
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“Is God there?”
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*Is God there?* Is God there? We may not always be aware of it, but we all ask this question at one time or another. We don’t have to be atheists—as Khrushchev was. And we don’t have to look into outer space. Sometimes even the most sincere believer can look at the world that is very nearby, and still ask, “is God there?”

When the earthquake hit Haiti, for example, you better believe that there were people asking, “is God there?”

When the tsunami washed over southeast Asia back in 2004, or when Hurricane Katrina slammed into New Orleans, you better believe that there were people asking, “is God really there?”

When children suffer, or a family can’t make ends meet, or abuse happens, or war happens, you can’t help but ask, “is God there?” And if the answer is “yes,” then where is the evidence? How do we know? How can we tell?

If there’s one question that I have encountered over the years which has caused more people to give up on faith, it’s that one...the one right there on the screen. “Is God really there?”

I know a young man, for instance, who watched his grandfather die suddenly, and he prayed, “Where are you, God? Why aren’t you helping? Why aren’t you doing something?” But this young man didn’t hear any answer, and his grandfather died. And so he gave up on faith. And he gave up on prayer. And he gave up on the church. And he gave up on God too.

<b>Media Event</b>	
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You know, there are certain situations in which religion and science can mesh pretty well, at least...in a lot of people’s minds. When we look at the incredible ways that subatomic particles behave, when we look at the wonder of creation, when we think about the universe being born instantly in a single, gigantic explosion—it’s not too difficult to look at things like that and say, “wow! There must surely be a pretty amazing God behind all of this!”

But when it comes to that question, “Is God there?”—especially in the face of suffering, or pain, or heartache—that’s when religion and science can seem to be worlds apart.

<b>Media Event</b>
“If God is there, why do people suffer?”

In other words, if we take the question a step further, and ask, “if God is there, why do people suffer?” then religion and science can give us very different answers.

For instance, science has all sorts of perfectly good, valid reasons as to why tragedies occur. A man named John Polkinghorne talks a lot about this in his book, *Questions of Truth*, which our church recently used as part of a book study—and which the Connections Sunday school class continues to look at. For example, earthquakes happen, Polkinghorne tells us, because of the tectonic movement of plates on the earth’s crust, which is an absolutely necessary process to replenish the minerals in the earth’s soil to allow life to exist. Living creatures simply would not be here without earthquakes, science tells us.

Or...science also tells us that disease happens as the unfortunate side-effect of the evolutionary process. Life changes and mutates over time: the good changes we call progress, the bad changes we call disease. Life as we know it could not exist without disease, science tells us.

Science has perfectly good answers as to why suffering occurs. But if we ask that same question of *religion*, it’s a whole lot harder to come up with a really good answer. When a person is looking for God in the midst of tragedy, or heartache, for instance, explaining the scientific reasons behind the situation they’re facing does very little address the more spiritual question of “is God there...in the midst of all of it?”

I think we probably all have gone through experiences of asking God—or even begging God—to relieve the suffering of someone that we know, and yet it doesn't happen—at least, not in the way that we expect. Now, there may have been perfectly good scientific reasons to explain why the relief doesn't come, but in the moment—none of those reasons matter. What matters is knowing whether God is there or not. And so we pray to God, and we plead with God to take the suffering away, and if it doesn't happen in the way we're looking for, we can't help but ask, “is God really there”?

What has happened in your life to cause you to ask, “is God really there?” When have you prayed to God to do something that was good and noble and right, and it just did not happen?

If you have experienced moments like that, you know already that in some ways, there is no bigger question. Scientists and theologians and scholars can debate creation and evolution and subatomic particles and the big bang theory from here to eternity—let them have it—but at the end of the day, what we want to know most of all is if God is really there. And if so, then why is the world still filled with so much innocent suffering, and pain, and heartache?

And my friends, there are no easy answers to that question. There is nothing that magically causes it to all make sense. And in the absence of any easy answers, it can almost be enough to make us want to throw up our hands and give up on this whole thing called faith. It can almost be enough to make us want to give up on prayer, and the church, and God.

And, you know—for me personally—it almost would be enough to make me throw up my hands and give up on all of it...if it were not for this amazing person named Jesus. Because Jesus knew what it's like. Jesus was a Savior who knew all the right answers—he taught that God is love, and God cares for us, and God forgives us, and God wants us to love each other. Jesus had all the right answers!

And yet, hanging on the cross, Jesus prayed a Psalm [--THE ONE WE HEARD TODAY--], and he cried out:

<b>Media Event</b>
“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” <i>Matthew 27:46</i>

[DANIEL READS TEXT.] Jesus is a Savior who knows what it's like to stare out into what seems like emptiness, and to ask, *“Is God really there?”* And my friends, if even Jesus could ask a question like that, and still not give up on faith as he was dying on the cross; then the good news is that you can and I can ask, “is God there” and we do not have to give up on faith either.

In other words, the cross of Jesus Christ is God's sign to you and to me that when suffering comes our way that we cannot explain, and when we stare out into emptiness and ask if God is really there, asking that does not mean in the least that we are outside the bounds of God's love and care and understanding. In fact, the exact opposite is true: because it is precisely when we ask if God is really there that we move closer to the heart of the one who

hung on a cross, and asked the exact same thing, and who chose to place his trust in God anyway.

Which means, amazingly enough, that the cross of Jesus Christ is not just a symbol of feeling abandoned by God, it is also the symbol of God's steadfast faithfulness. It is not just a symbol of defeat and despair, but—even more so—a symbol of our greatest hope and joy. Or to put it another way, God was able to take the pain of the cross, and to transform it into something beautiful, and amazing, and good.

And, my friends, if we are looking for evidence of God, that is as close to cold, hard proof as we will ever come: when a symbol of death is transformed into a symbol of life, then we know that God is there. When pain is transformed into joy, then we know that God is there. When a dead-end is transformed into a new beginning, then we know that God is there. When revenge is transformed into mercy, then we know that God is there. And when enemies are transformed into friends, then we know that is God is there.

Which brings us to one final thought that I'd like to leave us with today. It comes from Richard Rohr again, the Franciscan monk that we heard from at the end of last week's sermon. I'm again paraphrasing a little, but what Richard Rohr essentially says for us this week is this:

**Media Event**

**"The true measure of faith is not its ability to transmit pain, but to transform it."**

[DANIEL READS TEXT.] In other words, the pain will come to all of us. Sooner or later, the moments when we ask if God is really there will come to each and every one of us.

And when those moments do come, we have a choice to make: either we can transmit the pain in big ways and little ways to everyone around us, or we can lift it up to God, and allow God to transform it.

When somebody pushes us, we can either push them back, or we can trust in God, and give them a hug.

When somebody speaks ill of us, we can either speak ill of them, or we can trust in God, and give them a kiss—to quote Bono.

And when the world confronts us with suffering that we cannot understand or fathom, we can either shake our fists in anger, or we can trust in God, and use our hands to build something better.

None of which will succeed in making the pain and suffering go away completely. Only God can do that in the end. And until then, the world will still be a place where people push and speak ill and suffer innocently. We Christians are not meant to be naïve about that.

But at least we as followers of Jesus Christ, we can begin to give an answer today to that age old question, “is God there?”

“Is God there, when the innocent suffer? Is God there, when we lose a loved one? Is God there, when disease strikes? Is God there, when the ground shakes?”

And in response, we hear from a cross somewhere outside of Jerusalem—and from a tomb that is standing empty—a resounding “Yes!” “Yes, God is there. God is there, wherever pain is being transformed into promise. Yes, God is there, wherever death is giving way to life. Yes, God is there, working to change the dead-ends of our circumstances into new beginnings. Yes, God is there, transforming you and me into new creations.”

God is there. And there is no promise that we can trust more than that.

Thanks be to God, Amen.