

Sermon by the Right Reverend John R. Stephens
Confirmation Service October 23, 2021
Memorial James of Jerusalem, brother off Jesus

As I listened to the radio in the car on a rather dull and overcast day, I heard a voice say that there are more stars in the universe than all the grains of sand on the planet. That got my attention. I don't know what that fact does for you but it causes me to think about life and purpose and meaning and insignificance and the vastness of it all. There are more stars in our ever expanding and growing universe than all the grains of sand (not on a given beach of your favourite sun destination) but on this entire planet. We are part of something that is so much bigger than even our imaginations could ever try to comprehend.

Just recently, you may have heard that a few travellers, not astronauts or trained space explorers, but just regular people, travelled 107 kilometres straight up to the far reaches of the atmosphere that encompasses this island home we call earth. If you heard about this you will know that William Shatner of Star Trek fame was one of those travellers. Whatever you may feel about whether people should be spending this kind of money on rocket adventures and space travel instead of worrying more about how we care for this planet and its inhabitants... to be propelled to the outer limits of our atmosphere is quite extraordinary. William Shatner had trouble finding the right and appropriate words but offered this: "That was unlike anything they described. What you have given me is the most profound experience. I hope I never recover from this. I hope that I can maintain what I feel now. I don't want to lose it." Clearly an encounter with something bigger than our imaginations could ever try to comprehend, where words fail. I wonder if that is a good way to describe an encounter with the holiness of God?

Have you noticed that there are certain aspects of life that are just simply too hard to put into words. If we do try, the words do not really work or seem adequate or quite fulfill what we are hoping they might. They are really all that we have but words just cannot fully define or describe or summarize love or beauty or wonder or peace or music or colour or art or grief or hope. The words themselves are shorthand or simply bookmarks for something so much more and so much bigger. The words are not enough but they are all that we have as we try to describe when our hearts and minds and souls are affected by things beyond the tight definitions of this world and even beyond this world. There is more, so much more than we often pay attention to in this life. And perhaps that is why all of us are here today in this cathedral on this day. Confirming this in our lives and in our prayers. ...And we are not the only ones who have done this.

In the church's calendar, today is the day that we remember James the brother of Jesus. James is not mentioned often in the gospels but played an enormous role as the church began to form and develop. He was one who had some trouble seeing the possibilities of God acting beyond some tight definitions but gradually came to discover more and more that God was not to be held to only narrow ideas and projections but in fact was showering love and grace upon all people. He came to discover that God is far more expansive than the inadequate definitions that many of us like to place on God. It took him a while to come to this place in his own spiritual journey, and many people since then have

also had trouble seeing and understanding that the limits that we place on God are often our own limits but have little to do with God's unconditional love and grace.

Interestingly James was mentioned in the gospel passage we heard just a few moments ago. James's name was included as the people of Jesus' home town who wondered how Jesus could have come up with all of the things that he was saying and preaching and doing. Unfortunately, we do not get to eavesdrop on that time of long ago and we do not know what Jesus was saying to that unfavourable home town crowd; all we know is what their reaction was. And it was not good. They were appalled at him and by him. He was not conforming to what they wanted Jesus to preach about and to offer them. They wanted him to give a simple version of God with little threat to the way they viewed life and viewed other people. And Jesus seems to reply, that's not what this is about. Jesus seemed to be saying to them that God is bigger and greater and more expansive than you believe right now. God is moving in your midst, acting in your midst, stirring up hope in your midst, opening eyes in your midst to beauty and wonder and joy, changing lives in your midst by offering love and compassion and forgiveness and grace in ways that people are transformed and changed... and always will be. And the people of his home town, well they were angry. This did not fit with how they understood how God worked or moved or responded. And Jesus, it seems, said that that was the point. This was a new knowledge and understanding of God. That indeed God was with us in the words and Word known to us as Jesus of Nazareth.

I pointed out at the beginning of this sermon that the number of stars in the universe is more than the grains of sand on this planet, I spoke of travelling to the edge of the earth's atmosphere and being transformed by the beauty and wonder of it all. It is that kind of information, it seems to me that Jesus was offering long ago in his home town. For he was revealing the very presence of God in their midst and they just did not know what to do with it. And do we?

You see today a number of people will be confirming, reaffirming their faith or are being received into the Anglican Church. And in some ways we could just see this as conforming to a certain way to think about God and the world. And I really hope that that is not what we are doing. I hope that we are here to affirm that these people are confirming their faith in this radical Jesus, who is calling them not to simply have a faith in a predictable God of simplicity but rather a God who will change and transform them. A God who comes to us in human form to stir us to see anew that God is known amongst us and calling us to new life. That while the world around us is in a climate emergency, our faith is calling us to care for this earth and treat it as gift from the source of life. That while we continue to disregard so many people in this world with our racism, colonialism, residential schools, misogyny, efforts to keep the poor in poverty... our faith is calling us to respect the dignity of every human being. While many seek a future centred on individualism our hope in God is about community and loving our neighbours. Our faith is a radical response to the world all around us. Our faith is inviting us not simply to conform but to confirm that indeed God is known amongst us and within us and that the Holy Spirit continues to work through us.

Mary Oliver writes this poem called *Drifting* which seems to speak of the things perhaps that Jesus spoke about long ago and what we might want to pay attention to in the world of our day:

Drifting, by Mary Oliver

*I was enjoying everything: the rain, the path
wherever it was taking me, the earth roots
beginning to stir.
I didn't intend to start thinking about God,
it just happened.
How God, [for the gods, are] is invisible,
quite understandable
But holiness is visible, entirely.
It's wonderful to walk along like that,
thought not the usual intention to reach an answer
but merely drifting.
Like clouds that only seem weightless.
but of course are not.
Are really important.
I mean, terribly important.
Not decoration by any means.
By next week the violets will be blooming.
Anyway, this was my delicious walk in the rain.
What was it actually about?
Think about what it is that music is trying to say.
It was something like that.*

Mary Oliver called that poem Drifting, I wonder if the knowledge that there are more stars in the universe than all the grains of sand on this planet causes us to drift towards affirming a new understanding that God is more than we can ask or imagine.