

Our Personal Journey of Faith

Sermon by Debby Laporte

based on Exodus 17:1-7, May 5, 2024

(Adapted from Canadian Shield Regional Council service for 2024,
by Rev Rob Smith)

Early Christmas morning, on December 25, 2021, a miracle happened, Nasa's revolutionary new space observatory, the James Webb Space Telescope or JWST as it is affectionately known, was perfectly launched from Kourou, French Guiana near the equator, whereby 10,000 people who had been involved in this project of over 25 years held their breath. 300 individual processes had to work and only 3 could fail and none did.

The telescope had to fly on its journey to space folded up as it is too massive to fit on any existing rocket. It had a long list of deployments and one of its first tasks was to deploy the honeycomb, gold covered solar array to open up and to soak up the rays of our sun to provide power for its journey. It also had to deploy a sunshield to protect it from absorbing heat from our sun, allowing JWST to remain a frigid -370 degrees Fahrenheit (-225 Celsius).

The beautiful, amazing pictures that this incredible telescope has taken only augment our journey of discovery of the universe created by God. The JWST has special filters that "paint" the pictures revealing breathtaking beauty as it gathers infrared light from galaxies that have crossed 13.6 billion light-years through space and time. Some of the pictures like the Carmina Nebula, Mystic Mountain and my favourite, the Pillars of Creation, reveal things that happened 6.5 million years ago as the universe is constantly changing.

The JWST is continuing on a journey 1.5 million kilometres away from our planet, circling the sun and delving into the cosmos, opening up new worlds that we had no idea existed. We now know that the universe has at least a trillion galaxies each having 1 to 1.5 billion stars. This does not lessen the fact that God is at the heart of the universe – perhaps we are now ready for new revelations. And to realize how insignificant we are in relation to the enormity of our universe, or as I like to think that we are unique and hold a special place in the universe where life teams and creation is constantly happening right here on our tiny, tiny planet. See what we can do when we work together in synergy.

Graham and I were recently invited to a showing of the JWST presentation at IMAX and we brought our eleven-year-old grandson Jack. When the presentation ended, Jack told us that he could not even talk during the movie. I know that it made a great impression on him as he then said to me: Nanny, we are just comic dust!

Our individual lives of faith are a journey. It is a life of movement and growth. As people of faith, we must be willing to let the Spirit move us to new places, new experiences, and new understandings. It is a life of change and evolution. After all, we are on a journey of self-realization and discovery and every day can be an adventure and often an adventure that was not planned.

Let us journey back in time to our school days. We can all remember at least one teacher that was instrumental in our lives in our education journey. And hopefully that one teacher was one that was caring and encouraging. My teachers were, and I remember one especially when I was a student at Laurentian University: Dr. Sinclair, a professor and a Roman Catholic priest who taught astronomy at Laurentian University, my favourite course. At one class a student asked him how he could believe in God because he taught Astronomy, and I will never forget his answer... "How could you not believe!" Simple and to the point and the question was never asked again.

It is a good metaphor to illustrate that the life of faith is about movement and change. It is a journey.

Our passage from the book of Exodus also builds on the journey theme. In this passage we meet the people of Israel on their journey from the land of Egypt: the land of slavery and bondage, to the Promised Land; the land of abundance and freedom. In this story we discover that they have run out of water. Here they are in the middle of the desert. They are not quite sure where they are or exactly where they are going, and they are without water. Understandably, they are concerned. They are frightened. They are angry. They even want to go back to Egypt, back to their oppressors, because there at least they had water. They complain bitterly to Moses, their leader. They accuse him of betraying them and bringing them out into the desert to die.

Moses, fearing for his life, cries out to God in prayer: "What shall I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." God responds to his prayer by providing them water from the rock. The people drink and for the moment they are satisfied, and all is well. It is a simple, yet profound story that tells us much about the journey of faith.

First of all, we discover that the journey of faith begins with God. According to our story, it is God who is leading them by stages on this journey. It is God who has called them out of their bondage in Egypt and invited them to journey towards the Promised Land. God is still inviting. God invites each and every one of us to join the journey. We too are invited to follow God as God leads us by stages from the land of oppression, of brokenness, to the land of shalom, a land of healing, a land of freedom and abundance. The journey begins with God. God reaches out to us in love and invites us to join God on the journey.

Secondly, we discover that this is not just an individual journey, but a corporate one. We are each one of us, one part of an amazing puzzle, trying to see where we fit in. We are led as a "whole congregation." This is an important challenge to our highly individualistic and self-centered society and Christian faith.

The life of faith, the journey of faith, is not one we do alone. It is one we do in community. We need each other if we are to make it. Actually, we cannot do anything on our own to survive these days. You might say, well I am going on a hike by myself, like maybe the Camino Trail in Spain, but it took a jet plane to get you there and back home, it took a manufacturer to make all your gear and people on the trail to provide you with food and water and a place to lay your

head. One of my clients who recently went on this trip only commented about the wonderful, amazing people that he met.

And yes, we do come to faith as individuals, but we grow in our faith through community. God needs us to be engaged with each other on this journey and God needs us to engage in the world around us. We need to understand our interconnectedness and work towards healing the brokenness in our world. We do not journey alone. We are never truly alone.

Thirdly, the life of faith is not without its trials and tribulations. Like the people of Israel, we will, from time to time, find ourselves without water. We may find ourselves in places that are uncomfortable, places that cause us to be afraid. We might find ourselves at times wondering where God is and whether we have what we need for the journey.

Just because we have accepted God's invitation to the journey does not mean that our lives will be free of difficulty. Life is hard at times, and being a person of faith does not protect us from that reality. We still find ourselves at times without water, incredibly thirsty for answers. The incredible team that built and launched the JWST was not without challenges and the project was halted and almost discontinued, but they persevered with God's help – whether they knew it or not. And yes, they blew the budget but I am sure that once they saw the pictures even the managers and accountants would say...it was all worth it.

We can respond to this reality of trials and tribulations in two ways. We can, like the people of Israel complain and blame God for putting us in this situation. We can look wistfully back to some earlier time before we followed God into this mess. Or, like Moses, we can take responsibility for our journey and turn to God in prayer. We can seek God's wisdom in the midst of the situation and ask God to lead us to the water.

Today is a perfect time for us to look at our journey of faith. How is God presently at work in our life? What new thing have we discovered about God recently? Where is God leading us? Are we finding a community of faithful people who are able to encourage us on our journey of faith? Are we missing anything we need on our journey? Do we have enough water for the journey? If we are missing something we need for our journey, how are we responding to that reality? Are we complaining and grumbling? Are we wishing that we had never embarked on this journey? Or, are we seeking God's wisdom? Are we trying to find some way to move through this challenging time? Have we found a rock full of water lately? These are important questions for us to work through as we continue our journey as people of faith and followers of Jesus.

We at St Andrew's are on a special journey called Doing Discipleship which is bringing us on a path of self-discovery and interconnectedness, but really, we don't know where we will be in five years let alone next year. But we have faith that we will continue to do the work that God is lining us up to do. We have to listen, to communicate with each other, respect and learn from each other and expand our horizons.

Each one of us is invited by God on a journey of faith. God wants us to grow into a deeper experience of God's love. God also wants us to engage in our world by seeking to fulfill the part God has created for us to do. God has something for each of us to do in the business of mending our broken world, regardless of our age or our abilities. Each of us has a special talent that no one else has, each of us has their own piece of the puzzle that fits into the larger puzzle that represents our church.

But I also invite each of us today to honour our own journey of faith. We do that by committing ourselves to growing in our relationship with God through prayer, meditation, corporate worship, wrestling with God's word, engaging in our questions and our doubts, building community, and reaching out in fellowship to those who are different from us. We also honour our journey of faith by discerning what God is still asking us to do and committing ourselves to doing it.

I commit myself to honouring your journey. I honour your journey by helping you find the resources you need to follow the path that God is leading you on. I honour your journey by praying for you, by supporting you, by challenging you and by loving you. Let us repeat this. I honour your journey by praying for you, by supporting you, by challenging you and by loving you. I also honour your journey by honouring my own journey. By keeping my feet moving, I challenge you to keep your feet moving as we all follow a path this is being opened up to us. Butterflies remind us that it is never too late for a transformation to be the person we are supposed to be.

I invite us also to honour each other's journey of faith through acceptance and love. We may not always agree with how God is leading each of us, but we honour each other's journey by not judging and by supporting each other. We need to acknowledge that God may be leading us in different ways and that is okay.

Let us commit ourselves this day to honouring the journey God has called us on and to honouring each other on our respective journeys as we think about the JWST circling overhead on its journey to discovering God's creation. Amen.