

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**  
**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**October 28, 2012**  
**“The Hands of Faith”**

**James 1:19-25** | *Read the scripture online* <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=218608981>

There are three quotes I'd like you to remember from this sermon. The first is from Danish author Jostein Gaarder and it goes like this: *“The applause for the Big Bang was only heard 15 billion years after the explosion.”*<sup>1</sup> As far as we can tell the beginning of life occurred over 15 billion years ago. It involved an interplay between God and the laws of science that we have named “the Big Bang.” Time and space itself, gravity, mass, energy: all these things were created and understood to be good. They were set in motion along an unwinding path that has led to us and beyond us. Skeptics and agnostics argue that there is no need to look for God's fingerprints when studying the unfolding drama of the universe. They argue that science can explain everything by itself, without needing to consider God in the equation. But the evolution of all life was not just a physical, scientific process. It was something shaped by divine intentionality and purpose. Consider human consciousness itself. Our ability to think wasn't just some arbitrary character trait that emerged in the overall struggle for survival of the fittest. It was, in many ways, the whole point of evolution itself. The applause for the Big Bang was only heard 15 billion years after the explosion, and much of the purpose of the explosion was to get to that moment of applause...to get to the appearance of living, conscious beings, who can look back in time and applaud the wonder of creation itself while offering praises to God the Creator.<sup>2</sup>

This is part of the unique Christian message that I mentioned in last week's sermon about the depth of faith. The Kingdom of God is like a seed planted deep in rich soil, and like yeast sprinkled in large batches of flour. The realm of God is active in all the material of life, including us, acting with purpose, intentionality and love, until at last from that soil a plant emerges that bears fruit and shelters life; until at last all the flour has been leavened so it can become bread that feeds all who are hungry. God is intentionally present in you and me and this world, working, healing, leavening so that each of us may look back over 15 billion years, applauding and giving thanks for the wonder of creation of old that is still active today. I'm sorry if this sounds a bit abstract, but it is a critical idea of our faith, especially as Presbyterian descendants of the Protestant Reformation.

So what comes next? By faith we have affirmed that God is at work in the depth of our lives to will what is good and just and loving. Well, we can either work with God or against God. Now the conversation moves from doctrines to deeds, from what we believe to how we act. The depth of faith shifts to the hands of faith. For this we turn to our scripture passage from the book of James. James' letter is like a short sermon written not to convert people to the Christian faith, but to teach them how to live out the faith they already possess. James' advice is very straightforward. The second quote I want you to remember comes from verse 22: *Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*



James' advice sounds quite simple: Live out your faith; don't just think about it. Be doers of what God wills, not merely hearers of what is said about God. Now I could dismiss you all right now and send you forth with the assignment to be "doers of God's word." While some of you might stampede for the exits, grateful for a shortened worship service, others would likely stop about halfway down the aisle, turn around and ask, "What exactly are we supposed to do?" In Charles Dickens' novel *Bleak House*, there's a funny scene in which Mr. George goes to his friend Mr. Bagnet to seek some advice. While he explains the problem, Mr. Bagnet looks the entire time at his wife, Mrs. Bagnet. Once Mr. George is done, Mr. Bagnet asks to be sure he has told him everything, and that he promises to be guided by *his* advice. Once Mr. George assures him so, Mr. Bagnet wisely turns to his wife and says, "[Madame], give him my opinion. You know it. Tell him what it is." The woman, obviously the wiser of the two, offers this simple, ethical advice: *Do nothing in the dark, be no part of anything under-handed or mysterious, and never put your foot where you cannot see the ground.*<sup>3</sup>

James says, *Be doers of the word, not merely hearers of it.* Mrs. Bagnet says, "*Never put your foot where you cannot see the ground.*" Don't get involved in things where you're not standing on a solid foundation of what is good and virtuous. Both are solid words of advice. But how do we live by this wisdom in the messy, complicated world around us? That's a big question, which I'll come to in a moment with our third quote for today. But I promised for these first few sermons to share some illustrations from New Zealand, so let me offer an example from that land. Captain Cook's circumnavigation of New Zealand in 1769 paved the way for whalers from America and Britain to begin establishing relationships with the Maoris living there. When the first British missionaries arrived in 1814, they brought a degree of law and order to the unruly whaling communities as well as the gospel to the Maoris, for the bible was soon translated into the native language. The early settlers did incredible work in learning how to respect the local Maori culture, but those who followed them could not be bothered with such niceties. If they wanted land, they unscrupulously bought it from people who had no real concept of land ownership. If any tribe gave them trouble, swords and muskets were the answer. Or better yet, they sold the muskets to friendly tribes, who used them to kill other Maoris and thus decrease the indigenous population.

Many Maori took to heart the Christian faith taught to them. But when they saw how other, supposedly Christian settlers were treating the land and their kinsmen, some began to see Britain as being like Egypt of old, oppressing the Maori like Pharaoh had oppressed the Hebrews in the days of Moses. But one Maori chief named Te Whiti looked for a way to fight back that was still in keeping with his new-found Christian faith. He renounced violence, long before the days of Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. He told his people, "No good thing has ever been wrought by force...There is no reason why force should continue to have power over us." So when settlers tried to claim their land, Te Whiti had his people sneak out at night and take down the fence posts that marked these unjust purchases. When soldiers came against them, Te Whiti did sit-down protests years before the young people in America's Civil Rights movement did the same to protest racist Jim Crow laws. Eventually Te Whiti was arrested and unjustly taken away, but his legacy



continued in New Zealand. In 1975, when the Maori still struggled over the loss of their land, the female Maori leader, Whina Cooper, led a huge march the length of the entire northern island to protest these injustices.

James said, *Be doers of the word, not merely hearers of it.* As clear as that advice is, it requires some interpretation in order to be applied. We don't want to be people who look in a mirror and briefly see what is right, but then once we walk away from the mirror, we forget what we saw, losing sight of our principles and values, and end up doing nothing. "Be doers of the word" is half of a compound sentence. Be doers of the word, by acting as Christ would act. Or be doers of the word, by letting all your actions be guided by prayer and compassion. John Calvin, the father of the Presbyterian Reformation, exhorted the people of Geneva, Switzerland to be "doers of the word." He oversaw the building of a hospital, established welfare organizations to help the needy, and instructed his deacons to supervise deeds of mercy throughout the city. As Presbyterians, we know that faith without works is a hollow, empty faith indeed.

Another example comes from a book I read by Karen Armstrong. She said this: *Religion at its best helps human beings cultivate a sense of the sacred inviolability of each individual and thus mitigate the murderous violence to which our species is tragically prone.*<sup>4</sup> In other words, religion helps us recognize the sacredness of others, to see the face of Christ in our local and global neighbors. It helps us believe in their "sacred inviolability," that we are *not* to inflict violence or allow them to be violated. That theme is at the heart of the third quote for this morning. To simplify Armstrong's words: "Do no violence and allow no one to be violated." As followers of a violently crucified Savior, this ethical wisdom should have special poignancy for us.

Now take a moment to remember the three quotes for today. 1) *The applause for the Big Bang was only heard 15 billion years later.* God has been active since the dawn of time to bring about human consciousness, to create the human soul, and, by grace, to nurture acts of sacrificial love. 2) *Be doers of the word and not merely hearers.* Be an active part of God's great, intentional, justice-loving work in the world. How? By simple practices like prayer, study, humility, and by following fundamental moral principles such as: 3) *Do no violence and allow no one else to be violated.* Think about what that would mean to you if lived out as a fundamental life principle.

Next week I'll say more about how a deep faith, coupled with our willing, active hands of faith, can be molded into hearts of faith that will beat for generations to come. But for now, hold fast to the promises of our faith. Persevere. Be doers of the word who act, for so shall you be blessed in your doing (James 1:25).

AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> Jostein Gaarder, *Maya*, 112.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, 443.

<sup>4</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, 153.

