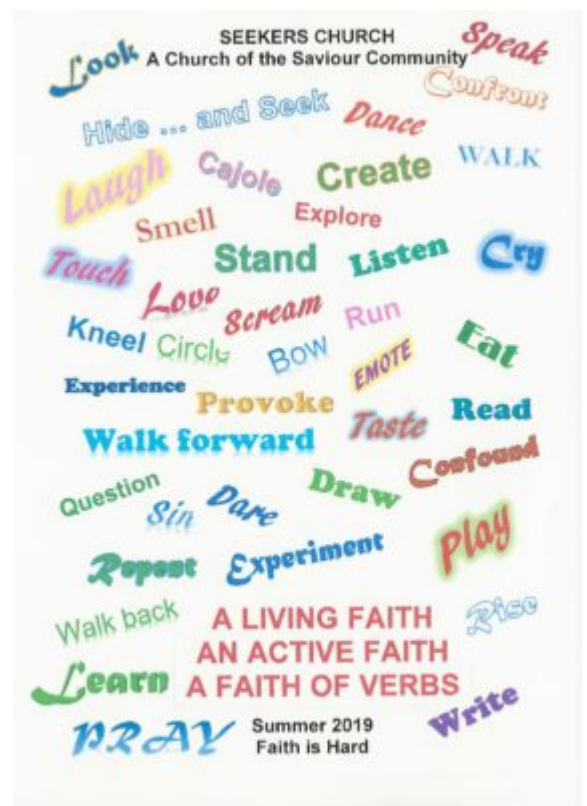


# “50th Anniversary of Apollo Moon Landing and Memories of My Father: What Will the Church be in 100 Years” by Cynthia Dahlin

July 28, 2019



## The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Good Morning. It's the middle of summer, lots of us on vacation, so this sermon is taking advantage of the summer mood—it will be a little off beat.

How many of you remember the night 50 years ago when Armstrong walked on the moon? Do you remember the mood of the country? Anything was possible. The future would be so wonderful and different. I went to Disney World 30 years ago, and I still

remember the futuristic scenes of flying space cars and people movers everywhere. Now, when you use your imagination, what do you think the world will be like 50 years from now? What about 100 years from now? I have put index cards on the seats—if you have a pen, take one minute to write down your initial impression—just key adjectives or main ideas you think of. I will give you one minute.

Many of you have been at Seekers for a while, and some just a few months, but you know we each try to work with the Bible and develop our own theology, so that we can discuss what we believe from a place of thinking about the words and their current context in the world. When you think of how we look at words written 2000 years ago, what do you think will survive in 100 years? What will the Christian church be in 100 years? On the other side of your card, jot down a couple of ideas that come to mind.

Now you have to listen to me for a couple of minutes before you get to share all those interesting ideas!

The impetus for this sermon was cleaning a closet—a chore I picked in the heat to avoid outside work. I found an old sermon of my father's. My father, Douglas Gordon Dahlin, died 31 years ago today at the age of 58. He was born in 1930, lived through the Depression and World War II, with a dysfunctional family and then was plucked out of working his way through the University of Minnesota by a recruiter from Harvard who gave him a full scholarship, and changed his life. His brother, who was 8 years older, left home as soon as he could enlist at age 17 in WWII, and served in Alaska. I think my father's value of education as the key to progress and a better society stemmed from his escape to Harvard, and his patriotism came from pride in his brother, and absorbing the atmosphere of service to country during his high school years. After Harvard, in 1953, he entered the Navy Reserve, went to the Newport Officer's Training School, and then went to Harvard Law School. By the time I was born, my father was

in the Navy, serving in the Pentagon on the South East Asian desk, and when I was about five, he moved to Capitol Hill to serve as the Counsel to the Military Operations Subcommittee of the Government Operations Committee of the House of Representatives. He later was Counsel to the full committee, and the whole time I was growing up, I could say his whole job title. The Committee rooms where he listened to testimony and prepared questions for committee members were down the hall from where Robert Mueller testified this week in the Rayburn House Office Building. I went there frequently.

This context is all to let you know that my father was really interested, I mean really, avidly interested in rockets. We had pamphlets from the firms who made rockets, papers submitted to hearings of the Congressional subcommittee about rockets, pictures of rockets and models of rockets around the house. My father took us to Florida for Christmas in 1968, one of the few vacations I remember, as he worked late, and went to Navy Reserve training at least one weekend a month. So we had few family vacations. But he had attended many rocket launches at Cape Canaveral as part of his job overseeing NASA budgets, and he wanted us to see and hear Apollo 8.

Have any of you seen a rocket launch? We found a parking spot along the highway at Cocoa Beach—I never before remembered seeing my dad so upset as it took us a few extra minutes to pack up the car—but we made it, and we heard the rumble, then the roar, then the earth shook, then the air shook, and we saw the rocket rise incredibly slowly, seem to hold still, then accelerate a bit, then finally speed up, and then—we all could exhale—it looked like it could rise and zoom out of sight and into space. We were staying at my great uncle's apartment, and he made sure we were parked in front of the TV a couple of nights later, when the astronauts, Borman, Lovell and Anders, read from Genesis. When the astronauts closed their transmission with "God bless all of you on this

good Earth," my father's eyes were glistening—he was not a cryer, so I won't say he was tearing up.

After this, I, too, was infected with rocket fever. I was 12, and applied for and was accepted into a Summer Science Institute at the Naval Research Lab, started taking flying lessons at 14 and earned my pilot's license at 15, and went straight for physics and chemistry in high school. As I thought astronauts might need it, I also learned to shoot downtown at the NRA range, and took my Latin and French seriously so I could talk to foreign scientists. At the same time, I was in Sunday School and confirmation class at Hope United Church of Christ in Fairfax, and was a real pain to my minister, Howard Borgstrom. I constantly talked about the inability to scientifically prove the existence of God, and looked up conditions that might have made Jesus seem dead, but not really be dead, so that he didn't really rise again. Meanwhile, I was listening to stories of a personal God, one who had helped Mr. Borgstrom live through the terror of serving on a bomber aircraft in WWII, and measuring this against the world of science I was entering. God versus Science, an age-old struggle.

So imagine my surprise, when a couple of weeks ago, to beat the heat, I stayed at home and cleaned out a closet that may not have been emptied since we returned to Arlington from Australia 20 years ago. I found a dusty bag with my old school projects and some old papers my mother had handed me, figuring they were either for me or for the trash. There were school projects, report cards, old issues of the high school newspaper I worked on, a whole mish mash.

And among them was a sermon my father gave—probably in 1975 or so, entitled "Personal God versus the World of Science." Here is some of it:

*"I know people who fire rockets,*

*have walked on the moon,  
command more powers than all time,  
use more power than all time,  
know more medicine than all time—do heart operations, brain  
operations  
make and fly jet aircraft  
make and sail nuclear subs and nuclear aircraft carriers  
Whose computers spew forth more communications than all men  
in history in a day,  
who calculate problems never even imagined.*

*So my world is different. Yours is too. What does it mean  
to Sunday worship? We have a bible—a great wisdom  
literature and good news written since the time of Jesus.  
But wisdom literature only does not distinguish us from many  
other religions. Many old writers were wise. Many made just  
as many truths and just as many mistakes as there are in the  
Bible.”*

And a bit later, the part that intrigues me:

*“What will be found if our society is covered by a  
nearby Vesuvius—what can we make of it that might show it is  
worthy of being called a Christian life?*

*I have said before that I think man’s fate is not here in  
socialism on Earth, but in spreading life to the stars, and  
bringing a message of life to other places.”*

Whoa! My intellectual struggles were deciding whether science and God could co-exist, and I’m grateful that my Political Theory professor at Wellesley made us read through the

centuries, especially St. Augustine, so that I could believe that God could make a world scientifically wonderful. My father, at the same time, was wondering how Christianity could survive on new planets in the future. And this was before Star Wars—if only just. (And it turned out my father loved Star Wars when it did come out; he went with my younger sister who reported that during some parts, he laughed so hard that the whole row of seats shook.)

Later in the sermon, the tone gets darker, and I think the top secret part of my dad's job, dealing with the nuclear subcommittee dealing with funding and overseeing weaponry and the competition with enemy countries affected his words. He said

*"I vote for putting man to work creating the future. To do that we need inspiration, not just in big things, but in each of our daily lives and work—at home and in the office. And that, I think is why we come together and share our lives and our faults for an hour or so on Sunday, to try to make our lives bearable from week to week in the face of all the odds and challenges. And to keep up our work with that strange inspiration that somehow comes and is God's daily gift to man—to bear all ills and pain and loss, and suffering and death, and yet to reach out and feel, like a child in the night, that there is help and hope and light, and certitude and help for pain."*

While I saw the part of my father who loved the challenge of putting men in space, in this sermon we hear the pain of a man in the center of the development of terrible weaponry and technology of the Cold War, worrying about a nuclear war, trying to figure out how to be a good person in the world on the constant brink of self destruction. He found value in religion and the need for a personal God while struggling with a world-wide technical challenge to avoid mutual destruction.

I think, that despite my apology in the beginning for not bringing a traditional sermon starting with the lectionary, we have ended out hitting all the verses. Hosea ends with God saying that despite their turning away from righteousness, the people of Israel will survive, be countless and will be called the children of the living God. Psalm 85 begs God for one more forgiveness, one more time, pointing out that God has restored and pardoned us so many times over the generations. Abraham negotiates with God to prevent the destruction of a whole city for the sins of some, and God's wrath can be turned aside by one person praying and interceding on behalf of the rest. Colossians tells us to "see to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. . . Do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons or Sabbaths. These are only the shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." This sounds to me like "keep the faith, but our faith could change as culture and technology change in the future. And finally, we have in Luke, the Lord's Prayer. Luke goes on, trying to convince us to pray, with the story of the persistent neighbor who receives help even though the friend from whom he wants to borrow bread does not want to answer the door in the nighttime. If we keep asking, we will receive help. For if we sinners know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more will God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?"

While my father was praying during his lifetime for faith to keep going despite worry of mutual destruction and of pollution destroying the planet, he kept praying and looking for God in his daily work. I am sometimes feeling a lot of despair about the debasement of political discourse, the lack of human dignity given to refugees and people of color, and because of the decline in the belief in being servant leaders in our communities. Being rich, famous and on Instagram seems to be much more valued than being an anchor to a family or

community. But oddly, the prophecy of Hosea gives me comfort even more than the rest of the lectionary. Our society may be pulled to worship money and corporate profits, but perhaps our role is to keep alive the Christian values of love your neighbor as yourself and serve your neighbor, as by serving those in need you are serving Christ. The society may be suffering as did Israel, but I have faith that these values can survive. We gather each Sunday to keep the spark alive, light the candles, pass the light around.

Now for just a minute or two, I'd like to hear the couple of words or ideas you might have written down. First, what do you think the world will be like in 50 or 100 years? (Take 4-5 responses)

Next, what do you think might survive of Christianity in 100 Years? (Take 4-5 responses)

So what do we have to offer for the future? Let us pray. Dear God, please send a spirit of love and peace to the entire world. Please give us the eyes to see and ears to hear each other, and teach us to hold back our weapons, punishments and even wrathful words as we listen. Hardest, give us the generosity to see the situations of others in the world and open our hands, hearts and borders to share. And as we learn to do this, let us learn to love our neighbors as ourselves, even if we live on another planet in 100 years!