

## SACRED SPACE

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Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

Fifty years ago yesterday, on July 20, 1969, human beings, for the first time, set foot on a planetary body other than Earth. We walked on the moon. The Apollo 11 mission took off from the Kennedy Space Center on July 16. The crew was comprised of three people: Commander Neil Armstrong, Lunar Module Pilot Buzz Aldrin, and Command Module Pilot Michael Collins. For three days, the crew traveled through space propelled by a Saturn V rocket. (We should not forget that a member of our church, Charlie Bradshaw, who died this year, was part of the team that designed that Saturn Launch Vehicle.)

When the Apollo crew and their ship reached the moon, the astronauts initiated orbit. Armstrong and Aldrin then transferred into the Lunar Module named Eagle. They separated from the main craft descending to the surface of the moon and set down in the Sea of Tranquility.

Six-and-a-half hours later, Neil Armstrong became the first person to ever set foot on the surface of the moon which he did in front of the largest television audience in history. It is estimated that one-sixth of the world's population was glued to the grainy black-and-white image on their TV sets. As Armstrong hopped from the last rung of the ladder down to the moon's surface he famously announced, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

Nineteen minutes later, it was Buzz Aldrin's turn to step onto the moon. The pair spent about two-and-a-quarter hours on the surface outside the Landing Module. One of things they did was to collect 47.5 pounds of lunar material to bring home for study.

After 21.5 hours on the moon's surface, Armstrong and Aldrin lifted off, rejoined Collins and the Command Module, and headed back to Earth. On July 24, after eight days in space, the crew splashed down in the Pacific Ocean. They were recovered by the USS Hornet.

As a kid watching the moon landing, I had no concept of how incredibly dangerous that mission was. The Apollo 8 mission had taken place only seven months earlier. That was the first time that we successfully orbited the moon. These astronauts were going boldly where no one had gone before. The complexity of every component of these missions is staggering. Astronauts had already lost their lives in this race to the moon. Because of the inherent danger and high probability of failure of the Apollo 11 mission, President Nixon had a speech ready just in case Armstrong and Aldrin were to be stranded on the moon. The speech was

written by presidential speechwriter William Safire. Fortunately, the speech stayed filed away unused. Here are a few lines from that unread speech:

*Fate has ordained that the men who went to the moon to explore in peace will stay on the moon to rest in peace.*

*These brave men, Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin, know that there is no hope for their recovery. But they also know that there is hope for mankind in their sacrifice.*

*These two men are laying down their lives in mankind's most noble goal: the search for truth and understanding...*

*For every human being who looks up at the moon in the nights to come will know that there is some corner of another world that is forever mankind.*

One of the great unknowns of that first moon mission—one of the disaster scenarios that might lead the president to read that speech—had to do with the actual surface of the moon. Astronomers knew that the moon was covered in a layer of fine dust. But they did not know the depth of the dust. How did dust behave in the moon's low gravity? Would the surface support the lander and the astronauts? Or would they simply get sucked into the ground and lost? No one knew until they got there. Fortunately, the surface turned out to be solid and supportive.

As we reflect on these early space missions, we can't help but contemplate what it was like to leave the familiar surroundings of home and to travel into the unknown. Would it be safe? What dangers were waiting? What will be discovered? For people of faith, there is an additional question: Will God be there? Does God's jurisdiction extend to this uncharted place?

The astronauts clearly trusted that God would be with them. On the Apollo 8 mission, on Christmas Eve 1968, as that spacecraft orbited the moon, the crew read from the book of Genesis—the first 10 verses describing creation: *In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.*

More remarkable, however, is what Buzz Aldrin did on the surface of the moon as a sacred expression of his faith. Aldrin is a Presbyterian. At the time, he was an Elder at the Webster Presbyterian Church in Webster, Texas, outside of Houston, not far from NASA Mission Control. Before the moon mission, Aldrin requested and received permission to carry bread and wine with him into space and to administer to himself communion aboard the Lunar Module on the surface of the moon. As Aldrin describes that moment: "I opened the little plastic packages which contained the bread and the wine. I poured the wine into the chalice our church had given me. In the one-sixth gravity of the moon, the wine slowly curled and gracefully came up

the side of the cup. Then I read the Scripture, 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Whosoever abides in me will bring forth much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing.' I ate the tiny Host and swallowed the wine. I gave thanks for the intelligence and spirit that had brought two young pilots to the Sea of Tranquility. It was interesting for me to think: the very first liquid ever poured on the moon, and the very first food eaten there, were the communion elements."

The question of God's presence was a concern raised by the people of Israel at the time of the Exile. In the Sixth Century BC, the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and forcibly carried many of the people back to Babylon. Those Jews who were abducted to an alien land questioned if God was still with them. The great temple in Jerusalem was regarded as God's throne on earth. With the temple destroyed and these people carried away to a foreign place, they were not sure if God was still with them. Were they alone? It took years, but eventually the people came to realize that even in that foreign land that God indeed was with them, that God had never left or abandoned them.

For us, as people of faith, it is the great comfort in our lives that our Lord loves us and cares for us, that God is always with us. This means that even in our darkest hours we need not feel alone. No matter what life throws at us, we should never feel like we have been stranded on the dark side of the moon,

We are reminded of God's presence throughout scripture. When the Hebrews are fleeing across the wilderness, God is with them. For the Exiles in Babylon, God is with them. When Elijah eludes the wrath of Queen Jezebel, God stays with him. When the apostle Paul is imprisoned, God is there.

We see this promise of God's presence expressed so eloquently in our Psalm reading for today. Here, the psalmist reminds us that God seeks us out and knows us. No matter what we do or where we go God is with us. Before we speak, God knows what we will say. Before we are born, God's can see us. From the heights of heaven to the depths of Sheol, God is there. Even if we try to hide in the darkness, God will see us. In words that seem to have been composed especially for astronauts journeying to the moon and landing in the Sea of Tranquility, we read, *If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

We may be blessed with the comfort and confidence of God's presence in our lives, but sadly not everyone possesses this belief. There are too many in our world who feel hopelessly abandoned or lost. It may be because they have run from God, or maybe they've found themselves in a place where it doesn't seem possible that God could be there. There are people who become lost to addiction. Or maybe they feel smothered in the despair of poverty. Maybe they are overwhelmed by illness or pain or loss. Maybe they are violently alone.

This week I had a long conversation with Shannon who runs HomeSafe here in Wilson County. (Her office is just across the street from the church.) HomeSafe is an organization that assists the victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence. How many victims of abuse are there in Wilson County? I don't know, but on Tuesday of this week, Shannon had been in court assisting eight victims. That was just one day.

Shannon was telling me about the victims she works with. She explained that these people don't become victims overnight. Their abusers work slowly and deliberately isolating them from family and friends, removing their support network, demeaning them and telling them that they are stupid, destroying their esteem and self-power, until the abuser can abuse with impunity.

As Shannon explained, what makes this situation especially insidious is that eventually the abuser becomes the only person the victim can trust. Law enforcement says, "We can protect you," but they can't. The judicial system says, "We will get justice," and they don't. But when the abuser says, "Cross me and I will hurt you," they keep their word. The victim becomes trapped in a dark, empty space—a place devoid of hope, a place where God seems absent. These victims—they are not on the moon; they are here in our community. They are our neighbors.

So, what does this have to do with us? In a word, everything. Jesus' command to his followers is clear—love God and love your neighbor. As an expression of this love Jesus instructs us to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, look after the sick, visit the prisoner. Jesus isn't advising his followers to just meet the needs of these people, but in doing so to assure them that they are not alone. As followers of Jesus, it is our sacred calling to be God's agents. As a church, we answer this call, for example, when we host the homeless in the winter. We are saying to them, 'You are not alone. You may not feel it now, but you are loved.'

When Buzz Aldrin celebrated communion on the surface of the moon, he didn't simply perform a religious ritual, he created a sacred space. When the crew of Apollo 8 read the story of Creation to the world, they created a sacred space. When we gather to worship God, we create a sacred space. But we also create a sacred space through our acts of care and compassion, when we reach out to our neighbors in need to let them know that they are loved. Just as God is with us every moment of every day, may everything we do be to make our world a sacred space. Amen.