

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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July 21, 2019
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Colossians 1:15-28

Cosmic Christ

In these days in which much of the news of current events include the divisiveness of our national politics as well as the rising tensions between countries in the international realm, there has been a lot of remembering and reminiscing about the Apollo space program in the 1960s that culminated in the landing on the moon for the first time 50 years ago yesterday. In the books and articles that have been written as well as in the movies and documentaries that have been made, this feat was remarkable in quite a number of ways.

First, technologically it was an accomplishment that simply was not possible when the goal was established by President John F. Kennedy in 1961. The scientific community simply did not have the tools or know-how to do what he said we'd do before the decade was out. And yet, with the resolve that came with it, and the work of over 400,000 people, and billions of dollars expended, the goal was met when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin stepped onto the surface of the moon, *and then* successfully returned to Earth with their fellow astronaut Michael Collins on July 24, 1969—thereby fulfilling Kennedy's pronouncement of sending a man to the moon and returning him safely to Earth.

Another way in which this event was remarkable is in how it united the world in a time of tumultuous tensions and challenges in our own nation and around the globe. With the Cold War in full force with the incredibly destructive war in Viet Nam going on abroad, while at home the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr, as well as Bobby Kennedy, evidenced the vitriol that was bubbling to the surface and that had our nation on edge. On that day 50 years ago yesterday, the entire world was glued to televisions and radios to witness the success of humanity in achieving this feat of leaving our own world for another. It was not just Americans who set foot on the moon, they were earthlings who did it.

This feat was the pinnacle of what was known as the Space Race between the United States and the Soviet Union that had begun on October 4, 1957, when the Soviet Union successfully launched a satellite into Earth orbit for the first time in history. The Soviet's list of accomplishments continued to outshine those of the U.S.A. when on April 12, 1961, Yuri Gagarin, a Soviet Air Force pilot became a cosmonaut when he was the first human to successfully orbit the Earth.

It was just a month later, that President Kennedy delivered his famous speech calling for the U.S.A. to "landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth."

Yuri Gagarin, upon his successful orbit of the Earth, immediately became a hero not only in his homeland of the Soviet Union, but around the world as well. And it was his success and the fame that he received that caught the attention of those in our own country who were determined that we should be up there as well.

During his orbital flight, Gagarin is purported to have said, "I don't see any God up here." Whether or not he actually said those words didn't stop Premier Nikita Khrushchev from making such a claim on Gagarin's behalf so as to accentuate and underscore the Soviets' anti-religion campaign.

I'm not quite sure how those words claiming that no god was seen upon leaving the Earth and gazing into outer space would have been received by people in 1961. I doubt that there was anyone who expected that God would be made manifest and visible in the void of space. And I'm very certain

that Christians around the world would not have been moved by this claim on the part of the Soviets, understanding that party's intent on ridding the world of religion.

Our human nature has within it an innate curiosity about every aspect of our lives. It was this curiosity that is at the very heart of the insatiable human trait that led us to devote overwhelming time and resources to getting to the moon and back. It's also the trait that is at the heart of our religious lives as we seek to see and encounter God who made heaven and earth.

Last Sunday, and again today, we're reading from that little book in the middle of the Bible's New Testament scriptures known as the Letter to the Colossians. This letter of the Apostle Paul was written to the Christians in the town of Colossae. Even though Paul was not one of those who founded the church there, he was nevertheless disturbed by some of the reports he'd heard about those in the Colossian church who were facing efforts to corrupt the fundamental simplicity of being a Christian—a follower of Jesus—by declaring the intension to follow Jesus.

After the opening words in this letter to the Colossians that reaffirm the centrality of faith in Jesus that is at the heart of the Christian life, comes what is one of the most eloquent descriptions of Jesus in all of the New Testament:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Col. 1:15-20)

This is a jam-packed paragraph that describes Jesus in such a thorough way that one is in awe of the words themselves.

To say that Jesus is the image of the invisible God is to address the ageless questions that have beset God's people from the beginning: What does God look like? Where is God? We need to look no further than Jesus to have a glimpse of the God we worship and serve.

"For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible . . ." It's this statement that leads us to look around us at both the earth upon which we live and to look heavenward at the cosmos beyond as well. From this vantage point, those traveling into outer space would indeed see evidence of God all around them as they gaze into the inky darkness of space bespeckled with lights of other worlds far distant.

Webster Presbyterian Church in Webster, Texas, outside of Houston became known as the "Church of the Astronauts" during the Apollo space program. Many of the astronauts as well as those working in the space program were members of this church because of its proximity to the NASA headquarters. Astronaut Buzz Aldrin, the Lunar Module pilot for the Apollo 11 mission is perhaps the most famous of the astronaut members of this church. Among the very limited personal items that he was allowed to take with him on the mission was a small communion cup as well as a packet of wine and communion bread. He knew that the moon landing would be happening on a Sunday when his family and church family would be gathered to worship in which prayers would be offered on behalf of the Apollo mission. So he worked with the pastor of the church ahead of time to obtain the blessing of

the church for Aldrin partaking of the communion elements on the lunar surface. Here is what Aldrin said about that experience, writing in *Guideposts* magazine in October 1970,

Neil and I separated from Mike Collins in the command module. Our powered descent was right on schedule, and perfect except for one unforeseeable difficulty. The automatic guidance system would have taken Eagle to an area with huge boulders. Neil had to steer Eagle to a more suitable terrain.

With only seconds' worth of fuel left, we touched down at 3:30 p.m.

Now Neil and I were sitting inside Eagle, while Mike circled in lunar orbit, unseen in the black sky above us. In a little while after our scheduled meal period, Neil would give the signal to step down the ladder onto the powdery surface of the moon. Now was the moment for communion.

So I unstowed the elements in their flight packets. I put them and the scripture reading on the little table in front of the abort guidance-system computer.

Then I called back to Houston.

"Houston, this is Eagle. This is the LM Pilot speaking. I would like to request a few moments of silence. I would like to invite each person listening in, wherever and whomever he may be, to contemplate for a moment the events of the past few hours and to give thanks in his own individual way."

For me this meant taking communion. In the radio blackout I opened the little plastic packages which contained bread and wine.

I poured the wine into the chalice our church had given me. In the one-sixth gravity of the moon the wine curled slowly and gracefully up the side of the cup. It was interesting to think that the very first liquid ever poured on the moon, and the first food eaten there, were communion elements.

And so, just before I partook of the elements, I read the words which I had chosen to indicate our trust that as man probes into space we are in fact acting in Christ.

I sensed especially strongly my unity with our church back home, and with the Church everywhere.

I read: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me." John 15:5 (TEV)

As the Apollo 11 50th anniversary observance continues, may we, the people of God in 2019 redouble our efforts to proclaim the centrality of Jesus in our lives so that others will be drawn to join us in our discipleship. And may we become leaders in the movement that brings about peace and reconciliation across the planet Earth.

In the words of the Letter to the Colossians, "This is what we preach as we warn and teach every person with all wisdom so that we might present each one mature in Christ." (Col. 1:28, CEB)