

“Tranquility Base”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Psalm 104
July 21, 2019 - Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

My mom’s father died in September of 1968, just two days before the end of the baseball season for his beloved New York Mets. The Mets were the second-worst team in the National League that year — and that was the best they’d ever done. But my grandfather would tell anyone who would listen that they were close to being a good baseball team. Even he couldn’t have imagined the Miracle Mets of the summer of ’69 who stormed through August and September to overtake the Chicago Cubs on their way to winning the pennant and the World Series.

I think my grandfather would have laughed that “they put a man on the moon’ before the Mets won it all, even if the man only won by three months.

I preach every week about stories for which I was not present, but usually there’s nobody else here who was. So I want to hear from you who were. Tell me what you remember about the moon landing!

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The Lunar Module named *Eagle* landed in the south-western corner of the lava plain known as the Sea of Tranquility. Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong went through their post-landing checklist, and then, about eighteen seconds after touching down, Armstrong radioed: “Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed.” Aldrin and Armstrong had chosen the name “Tranquility Base” just before leaving Earth and only the command center communicator was told that they’d be changing their call sign once they reached the surface.

Armstrong and Aldrin were scheduled to take a quick five-hour nap before preparing to depart the Lunar Module, but they were just a bit excited, so they started the prep early. Before they got busy, Aldrin radioed to ask everyone listening to “pause for a moment and contemplate the events of the past few hours and to give thanks in his or her own way.”

Quietly and privately, Buzz Aldrin — an elder at Webster Presbyterian Church just outside of Houston — opened the communion kit his pastor had prepared. “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.” He then read John 15:5: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” It was a Sunday.

This morning, Webster Presbyterian is celebrating Lunar Communion Sunday, as it does every July. Stories about the moon landing have been unavoidable this week. A nice, round number brings us all in on the party. When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper in just a bit, we’ll remember that we are united with Christians around the world in the simple meal that is a glorious feast. We’re united in every place, *and in every time*, sharing the table with Civil War Christians and Colonial Christians and Medieval Christians and those who broke bread together as the Gospel spread from Jerusalem and Antioch and those who were with Jesus on that longest of nights as he prayed in the garden. And we share the table with Elder Aldrin, whose solemn sacrament reminds us that our siblings in the faith who live across the ocean really aren’t that far away.

Here we are taking time to notice the grandness of God’s creation and the immensity of the mission that still captivates us fifty years later.

I’ve spent the week thinking about the tremendous expenditures of energy and imagination and money and brainpower and sheer humanity that it took to make possible that one small step and one giant leap. We know, of course, that it was driven by politics: the will to accomplish such a feat as putting humans on the moon would likely have been impossible without the fear that the Russians would get there first.

I'm just so delighted by the idea that fear could lead to something more than massive armament and finding new ways to destroy each other — though it clearly did that! It turns out ambition and competitiveness and urgency can lead to miracles of engineering and math and science, not just war.

There were so many obstacles, not the least of which was humanity itself. The human body was a problem, with its sensitivity to temperature and its tendency to not respond well to being shaken and its need to eat and breathe. Human society was a problem, and so NASA brought desegregation and the promotion of equal employment to communities in the Deep South becoming part of the project. Lives were lost along the way. The deaths of Apollo 1 were devastating, but what was learned changed the course of the program.

Through the lens of faith — that is, as we ponder this scientific achievement with the words of the psalmist fresh in our ears — I see the God who grants us this glorious universe watching with joy at the wonder we are capable of and wondering why we don't take more chances.

Psalms 104 describes an artist who doesn't do still-life, but rather multi-dimensional, multi-sensory, cosmos-sized installation pieces. God is wrapped in a cape of light and stretches, stretches, stretches the heavens to make room. God rides clouds and wind and flops down the seas like God is making a bed. God gets creative with the water and the land to make sure there's food for all the hungry creatures.

Speaking of creatures, the psalmist writes: "Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it."

"To sport in it" is the phrase a man in a top hat with a monocle would use. But we get the point. God made this mythical creature, Leviathan, to play in the sea. Or, as preachers like to put it, God made a holy rubber ducky!

This is a God who is engineer and painter and sculptor and architect and computer programmer. This is a God who takes big chances and makes weird stuff and does the impossible and laughs and cries and is willing to risk God's own life to pursue something indescribable. Perhaps we got God's attention fifty years ago yesterday, when we did something so bold and audacious, so peaceful and generative.

And perhaps, as the manifold works of God are threatened by poison and rising temperatures and human-created scarcity, God wonders why we haven't considered doing something bold and audacious, peaceful and generative.

In 1893 an English professor at Wellesley College in my old stomping grounds outside of Boston took a train trip to Colorado Springs where she was to teach a summer course. Along the way, she visited the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, with its vision of a future filled with gleaming alabaster cities. Her train rode through Kansas, where she saw amber waves of grain. Upon arrival in Colorado, she found a breathtaking view of the Great Plains atop Pike's Peak. On the mountain, the words of a poem started forming. That poem was published two years later in a church periodical to celebrate the Fourth of July.

Eleven years earlier, the organist at Grace Episcopal Church in Newark, New Jersey was riding a ferry from Coney Island when a tune came to him. His tune would eventually be married to her poem, giving us today's second hymn. Its lyrics celebrate the natural beauty of this continent and petition God to bestow grace upon the nation formed here. And then it gets very aspirational, asking God to help the nation where it falls short, to "mend [its] every flaw," to reform and refine the American republic with the goal of nobleness and accomplishments that are sacred.

I fear that in the current political climate, the poet Katherine Lee Bates would not be lauded for a glorious hymn beckoning God to make us better and thanking God for the breathtaking beauty of the landscape. I fear she would be told that we have no flaws and to suggest that we do are the treasonous ramblings of an elitist ivory tower hater of America, the beautiful.

The leaders and scientists and mathematicians and engineers and courageous astronauts shot for the moon, despite their flaws, their failures, their fears, and their disagreements. With God's help, may we seek to be unified for great things and may we see beyond ourselves to a future accomplished in small steps and giant leaps.

And may we, the people of God — the ones who gather at the table to be connected to the vine, apart from which we can do nothing — may we seek to be bold in our love for one another. May we, in faith, push for the difficult thing to be done in caring for our God-given tranquility base. May we revel in the exquisite and astonishing beauty we find in creation and in one another.

And may we sing to the Lord as long as we live — sing praise to our God while we have being.
Amen.