Christmas Eve/Christmas Day 2017 All Saints’ Church

Isaiah 9:2-7 Titus 2:11-1

Isaiah 52:7-10 Hebrews 1:1-4

Luke 2:1-20 and John 1:1-14

O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the True Light.

Merry Christmas!

Christmas always comes with memories… especially childhood memories, because we all become like children during Christmas.

I have a particularly vivid memory of one childhood Christmas. It was 1968 and my family was struggling. At best, it was a Blue Christmas for us. My mother was not well, overcome by her anxiety and depression, and having a very difficult time getting up in the morning. She was not capable of making any Christmas cheer; we children kept quiet, secluded in our rooms, praying that she would get better. Our Christmas gift was the hope that her laugh and lightness of step would return. I am very sympathetic to folks who struggle during the holidays. It’s difficult to deal with bleakness when you think the whole world is living in Joy.

Yet, I think it was my anguish that made this memory so special, even sacred. I was in need.

Do you remember? As the Apollo 8 spaceship catapulted through the heavens toward the moon on Christmas Eve 1968, the astronauts took turns reading from the Book of Genesis, the first ten verses. We all saw the beauty of the earth from their spacecraft. And then they ended their reading, “And from the crew of Apollo 8, we close with good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas- and God bless all of you on the good earth.”

It was as if those astronauts were talking to me…. The magnificence of the beauty, the simplicity of the words of Creation, the reality of a spaceship, the unfathomable mystery of outer space all descended upon me. I was taken out of myself, beyond my troubles, and hurled into God’s hands. I felt blessed, touched by eternal Light, embraced by Love, and finally I could let the tears flow. I wasn’t afraid anymore. And the tears gave me relief and hope. I didn’t feel alone. The magnificence of the cosmos had lighted upon me, and it was good.

This experience inspired a curiosity about space travel. It was not even a year later when Apollo 11 was landing on the moon. I was right there at the T.V. set- watching as Neil Armstrong’s one small step became “one giant leap for mankind.”

But there is a story about that landing that most of us do not know; we are told about it through Buzz Aldrin’s own writing about his perspective of the moon landing of Apollo 11 in 1969. Here are the words from his journal:

“On the first day of the moon landing, we awoke at 5:30am Houston time. Neil Armstrong and I separated from Mike Collins in the command module. Our powered descent was right on schedule. With only seconds worth of fuel left, we touch down on the moon at 3:30 pm.

“Now was the moment for Communion. So, I unstowed [the bread and the wine] from my personal allowance pouch. 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 Lunar Module Pilot speaking. I would like to request a few moments of silence. I would like to invite each person listening in, wherever or whomever they may be, to contemplate for a moment the events of the past few hours and to give thanks in their own individual way.’

“For me, this meant taking Communion. In the blackout, I opened the little plastic packages which contained the bread and the wine. I poured the wine into the chalice my parish had given me. In the one-sixth gravity of the moon, the wine curled slowly and gracefully up the cup. It was interesting to think that the very first liquid ever poured on the moon and the first food eaten there, were consecrated elements.

“Just before I partook of the elements, I read the words which I had chosen to indicate our trust that as we probe into space, we are in fact acting in Christ.

“I sensed especially strongly my unity with the 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.’”

Buzz Aldrin spoke later about his need to be in outer space within humility. That it would be almost obscene to be walking on the moon without reverence, without consciousness of the mystery of creation, and he wanted to be intentional- to be reminded of the inclusive nature of Jesus, to take Jesus within. To make his first act on the moon, to not be about steps, but to be one of worship and intimacy.

I love thinking about all the planning that must have gone into this act. Talking with his minister and parishioners, negotiating with NASA officials about his faith expressed, and making room in his personal allowance pouch for these precious items of bread and wine and chalice. The newly made altar was a table in front of the abort guidance-system computer. Now there’s an image- our altar as an abort guidance-system for when we are in trouble and in fear.

Maybe my favorite image, though, is the wine curling gracefully upward, towards him, toward all of us, as it always does.

Neil Armstrong, in an interview near the end of his life, talked about the landing as well. He said that the chance of returning safely to the earth was over 90%, but the chance of landing safely on the moon was at best 50-50 chance. And he was right; they were struggling to move off the side of a huge crater, and had about 30 seconds before mission control would abort the landing. But they made it. They landed safely in Tranquility.

“The emotional moment was the landing,” says Armstrong. “That human contact with the moon. We were there, we were in the lunar environment, the lunar gravity…. that was the emotional high, and the business of getting down the ladder to me was much less significant.”

Frail humans bringing God, goodness, gratefulness, and glory to the moon.

When you are in the presence of the holy, the natural responses are awe, reverence, thankfulness, and humility. These responses are enthroned in our own hearts. The eyes of our own hearts are enlightened as we see the power and beauty of interstellar space, and also the eyes of our hearts are enlightened as we see the power and beauty of our own inner space of soul and spirit. The two, outer and inner space, mirror each other.

And in this sight of the glory of outer and inner space, we instinctively mirror what God did first at Christmas.

God did not take up power, but put it down, and took up instead the power of love. And came to us a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger, child of Joseph and Mary, nobodies who became somebodies because of their Yes. And the multitude of Angels from on high came to the lowly shepherds in their fields and proclaimed, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace and good will.” And they were no longer afraid.

We are no longer afraid when the cosmos and earth meet within us. We are in Awe. We are in Presence, which is always beyond the mind. In this meeting, we have entered into a new reality. To be straddled between the glory of outer and our own inner space is, simply put, Heaven, and not as a geographical reality, but as a state of mind. Heaven is not fire insurance for the afterlife or an evacuation plan (thank you Richard Rohr), but rather heaven is Now, in our trinity union with God and neighbor and self, which is never about worthiness, and always about accepting God’s invitation to love. To say Yes.

We are heaven, and in heaven, and in that space, we, like God, do not take up power, but put it down, and instead take up the power of love.

In this Christmas reality, where God came to us not as a god, but like us, we should be walking around breathless, in awe of each other as vessels of the divine life. We should be kneeling at each other’s feet.[[1]](#footnote-1)

When we do that, when we believe in a Heaven like this, which is something and not nothing, we can cast fear aside.

And when we fear not, we become real, and we are set free. Merry Christmas!

1. Paraphrase of Karl Rahner, Catholic theologian, 1904-1984. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)