

Out-of-this-World Communion
World Communion Sunday
October 2, 2016
Trinity Bixby

Psalm 8

1 Corinthians 15: 35-44

On July 20, 1969 – just over 47 years ago – the whole story of humanity changed forever. On that day, Neil Armstrong and Eugene Buzz Aldrin successfully landed on the moon, becoming the first humans ever to step foot on ground that was not synonymous with earth. It was the culmination of years of engineering and psychology; the great triumphs and bitter loss that marked – and marks – humanity’s space programs. No one was entirely certain what Armstrong and Aldrin would face – they were both given instructions to fill a pouch on their leg with soil immediately after landing, just in case they had to leave the surface quickly. The whole way down, they struggled with alarm after alarm, and missed their target landing site by miles. Just before touching down, the computer gave them an erroneous low-fuel signal, due to the liquid fuel sloshing in the tank and uncovering a sensor. This was all on top of an already high-stress operation – and due to missing their target site, Armstrong landed the craft manually, with Aldrin calling out the navigation data. Above them, the Apollo 11 command/service module orbited the moon with its pilot, Michael Collins still inside, watching and relaying their transmissions just in case their lunar module’s radio failed to reach Earth. Everyone was hoping for success in their mission, but they were prepared for failure. President Nixon even had a speech written that he was ready to deliver in the event of mission failure – but fortunately, he never had to give it. Instead, the first steps on a heavenly body were broadcast internationally, and Neil Armstrong’s words would echo around the globe – “That’s one small step for [a] man; one giant leap for mankind”

Long before the first moon landing, humanity gazed up at the night sky and marveled at the beauty of the heavenly lights. The multitude of stars, whirling overhead in dizzying, yet predictable patterns became an example of God's majesty and glory. As the psalmist puts it, "When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers – the moon and the stars you set in place – what are mere mortals that you should think about them, human beings that you should care for them?" I love how the psalmist uses a familiar phrase – the work of your hands – and tweaks it to the "work of your fingers." God's fingers, the psalmist seems to be saying, are used for the delicate work of placing stars in the sky, like the fingers of weavers, skilled, rapid, delicate, and precise. Why the stars are placed where they are, the psalmist leaves as a mystery. Humanity is small in stature and number beneath the night sky, yet has been "crowned with glory and honor," "putting all things under their authority" – "flocks, herds, wild animals, birds of sky, fish of the sea, and everything in the ocean." Above us lies God alone – and yet, in the words of Stan Lee, "with great power comes great responsibility".

In the psalmist's day, authority over the living things was evident. Humanity had tamed wild beasts, ideally taking care of their needs in exchange for their labor – but we were still captive to natural forces. The seas held the terror of chaos and the unknown, leading to the popular understanding that God's order only existed because God had conquered the chaos monster that had been in the sea, called Tiamat by the Babylonians. Indeed, our psalm this morning contains a veiled reference to this chaos monster of the depths – "You have taught children and infants to tell of your strength, silencing your enemies, and all who oppose you." "All who oppose you" is a fairly wide translation – the Hebrew is more literally, "to put an end to enemy and avenger."

By the modern era, the vast expanse of the sea and the air above both

swarmed with human craft, travelling to-and-fro. Though we still know comparatively little about the depths of the sea, it no longer fills us with the same fear as it did our ancestors. Likewise, outer space beckons to us to explore beyond the skies above – and, just as we held authority and responsibility over the plants and animals of Earth, so we now hold authority over the building blocks of creation. Thermodynamics, nuclear and quantum physics, biotechnology and nanotechnology – we understand more about how creation holds together, and how to adjust it to our needs. Yet, even as our knowledge has grown, our need for wisdom to accompany it has grown apace. For although the psalmist holds humanity as crowned with glory and honor, the psalmist also notes that we are indeed lower than God. That no matter how far we explore, God’s majestic name is there before us, filling earth and the heavens beyond.

That’s where the story of the first moon landing is so amazing. You see, before Neil Armstrong’s historic first step, a less-well-known event took place within the lunar module on Tranquility base. Buzz Aldrin, an ordained ruling elder of Webster Presbyterian Church in Webster, Texas, unzipped his small pouch of personal items that each lunar astronaut was allowed to carry, and removed a sealed communion chalice and bread carried from the communion table blessed in worship, as well as an index card with John 15:5 written on it. He set the items before him, while Neil Armstrong looked on, and sent the following transmission to earth:

[audio file: “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.”]

In the silence that followed, Buzz Aldrin and his congregation took

communion together, separated by nearly 240,000 miles, but united in the body of Christ nevertheless. Here's how Aldrin describes it in an article from [Guideposts](#) after his return: "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 had 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.""

Truly, that was an out-of-this-world communion experience. But communion is always an out-of-this-world experience, especially as we recognize that every time we meet at this table, we meet not only those present physically, but everyone who has ever taken communion and everyone who ever will take communion. This table connects us across miles, across denominations, across time. In our passage from First Corinthians today, Paul reminds the church that there are many kinds of physical bodies, of plants, of animals, of planets and stars, and despite the differences among them, they are all connected by God's Spirit. You see, we experience a foretaste of the banquet of heaven at the communion table – a very small piece of resurrection life. Like the depths of the sea and like the multitude of stars above, the full and complete story of life-after-resurrection is still unknown. Nevertheless, Paul tries hard to describe something of it – but one of the nuances of his point gets mangled in translation. In verse 44, Paul describes two types of bodies, or *soma* in Greek – *psychikon soma* and *pneumatikon soma*. Most English

translations agree that *pneumatikon soma* means “spiritual bodies” – *pneuma* is the word for Spirit and breath. But where they struggle is in translating *psychikon soma*. *Psyche* means mind or soul or consciousness; think “psychology.” If Paul meant “physical bodies,” he would have written *physikon soma*. So, what’s going on here? It seems, despite the insistence of English translations, that Paul is not contrasting *physical bodies* with *spiritual bodies*. Instead, he is saying that after the resurrection, our individual bodies will be transformed and filled with God’s Holy Spirit. That, though we are separated from God and each other in our mortal bodies, the new and eternal life to come will reconnect us with God’s one Spirit. How this works? We have no idea as yet. But, again, when we commune together at God’s table, we experience the briefest glimpse of our spiritual bodies to come. Every communion we participate in, then, is an out-of-this-world communion, whether we celebrate here on this earthly globe, or in the depths of the sea, or on the moon and space beyond. For God’s glory and majesty fill the earth and the space above, as well as the space within.

May you know that God abides in you and you in God. May you reach out to others as Christ did, seeing and loving God’s image in all you encounter. And may you experience the Holy Spirit filling you and connecting you with all who are, all who have been, and all who will be. Amen.