

16th Sunday Ordinary Time (July 20-21, 2019)
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

It was past our bed time. In fact, my brother and I had been in bed for several hours.

Then, my dad came into our room and he told us to come downstairs.

I was 6, Karl was 4. We trudged down the steps and found that our grandparents were strangely in the living room too.

Everyone was glued to the fuzzy images on our Zenith black and white TV. Then someone said that history was about to happen, and we needed to watch it.

At 10:39 PM, Eastern Daylight time, my brother and I silently watched as Neil Armstrong went down that small ladder, touched his foot to the surface of the moon, and said those moving words: "That's one small step for man... one giant leap for mankind."

Human beings were walking on the moon.

Neil Armstrong and his partner, Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin, walked on the surface of the moon until well past 1:00 AM. My brother and I slept through a chunk of that.

But before we went up to bed, someone took us outside. We looked up at the stars, and they said to us, "Isn't it amazing? Someone just like us is up there!"

All over the world, people are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the moon landing. We are remembering a history-changing moment in the story of humanity. We are remembering that, when we put our minds to it, Americans can overcome every obstacle, and achieve more than anyone thought possible.

It was a Democrat president announced this goal for our nation. It was a Republican president to saw its completion. The president who articulated the goal – John Kennedy – was assassinated. His death left the country reeling. Then came the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The riots in the cities. An American culture struggling with political division. (Sound familiar?)

Then we saw those fuzzy images from space. The picture of earth from the moon's perspective, showing how small earth is in the context of the universe. Human beings achieving something that had seemed impossible. It was a moment of unity and hope.

Now I know that some of you who were not alive 50 years ago may be thinking, “Fr. Mike, this is ‘ancient history.’ What does it have to do with us?” But before you dismiss me as a nostalgic old guy, just remember: in order to send people to the moon, we basically had to invent the modern computer technology which now runs your smart phone, your tablet, and every video game you’ve ever played.

In order to get people to the moon in 1969, we basically had to create the modern laser technology which allows Verizon FIOS to stream your favorite episode of Spongebob Squarepants. Necessity became the mother of invention in the 1960’s. The next time you send a text message, or receive an email, or order an UBER on your phone, remember – you have the Apollo moon program to thank for so much of the technology which makes modern life possible.

A 50th anniversary gives us all a chance to learn new things about this event. And, very recently, I learned something that moved me very deeply.

As Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin made their final preparations to step out on the lunar surface, Aldrin radioed mission control and asked everyone to be silent. People watching on TV did not know what was happening.

But up there on the lunar surface, Aldrin was carefully opening a small bag which contained a very small bottle of red wine, and a small piece of bread.

You see, before Aldrin left for the moon, he attended a service at his Presbyterian church in Houston. They celebrated communion and prayed for his safety. And as he left, his pastor handed him the bread and wine which had been blessed at the church that day.

So on July 20, 1969, just before Buzz Aldrin stepped out on to the surface of the moon, he asked for silence. He opened the packets, and he prayed. The very first liquid consumed on the moon was the wine of communion. The first food eaten on the surface of the moon was the bread of life. The first meal on the moon was the meal which started in Jerusalem at the Last Supper.

Years later, Aldrin explained that he wanted to do this because he believed that God was revealing himself to human beings as we traveled into space. He later said that, as he received communion on the surface of the moon, he felt closer to every Christian, and every person, than he had ever felt before.

Aldrin said that his reception of communion reminded him that while the moon landing required a decade of work by countless people, in the end it is God – and God alone – who makes everything possible.

In today's first reading, Abraham and Sarah have a dream – and that dream seems impossible to achieve. They have been married a long time, and they have not been able to have a child. Now, everyone is telling them that they are 'too old.' The dream seems impossible.

Until – some strangers arrive. Abraham and Sarah get to work, providing hospitality to their guest. And these guests have brought with them a message. God has a plan for Abraham and Sarah. They *will* have a child!

Up to this point in the Book of Genesis, we've learned that Abraham and Sarah are very good people. They did what they were supposed to do. They did the work God asked them to do.

But the three strange visitors remind them that they need to listen to God, because *God is in charge*. Others may be saying that their dream will never come true, but Abraham and Sarah need to pause, and listen, and believe, that God is doing something wonderful. (If you keep reading the Book of Genesis, you discover that they **DO** have a child!)

The Gospels tell us that Martha and Mary loved God. They loved Jesus. They were faith-filled, strong Jewish women. As far as we can tell, they always tried to do the work that God had given them to do.

In today's Gospel, Jesus arrives and Martha gets to work. She starts cooking. Her sister Mary, however, decides to sit with Jesus, paying attention to what he has to say.

Too often, this reading is interpreted as proof that it is better to pray than to work. Usually, it's priests who *don't like to work* who preach it that way!

But notice – Jesus does not say that Martha is doing something *wrong*. He says that Mary is doing something *better*.

Before Mary busied herself with important tasks, she paused, and listened, and acknowledged that, in the end, we all need to focus on Jesus before we do anything else.

Martha had gone right to work. Maybe she assumed that she knew what Jesus wanted her to do that night? Mary had chosen to *listen* before she *acted*. She chose to acknowledge the Lord before anything else.

I don't know if Buzz Aldrin was thinking about this Gospel passage as he took communion on the surface of the moon, but in many ways he was living it out at that moment. Aldrin had historic work to do. It was time to walk on the moon! Thousands of scientists had worked to

make this moment possible.

But before Aldrin did that important work, he paused – as Mary did – and he chose the “better part.” He prayed. He listened. He acknowledged that everything *comes* from God and is possible *because* of God. He received Communion. He silently sat with Jesus.

You don’t have to go to the moon to understand how important that is. Right here, in Short Pump, the truth is clear.

God has a dream for you. God has work for you to do.

But before you do anything, stop. Be silent. Listen to Christ. Follow his direction.

Look up at the sky, and marvel at the fact that someone like us – Jesus Christ – is there.

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