

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ the King Sunday is the last Sunday of the church year. Next week it's Advent already. Today is exactly one month before Christmas, which I somehow can't quite believe. Time flies when you're having fun, I guess. Or when you're getting old, I have seemed to notice. So another church year gone, and another ready to begin. Round and round we go!

My son James got me out to see a movie recently – maybe three weeks ago (I don't go out to movies very often). The movie we saw was "First Man." It's about Neil Armstrong, the first man to walk on the moon. You have to understand that I'm a sucker for movies about the space program. That wasn't always the case. When Ron Howard's Apollo 13 came out back in the mid 90s, I thought it was a terrible idea. There was a great documentary about that already. The real thing. "Why would you make a feature film about that?" I grumbled. "Nothing beats the real thing." But then I watched it. And I loved it. It's now one of my favorite movies. So anyway, James and I went to see First Man, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. And then over the next couple of weeks I listened again through a couple of books on the space program that I have in audio form, and I watched a documentary on Netflix. And as I was doing this, and as the end of the church year was coming up, I was reminded again of how I have tied in the Apollo moon-landing missions with the church year. I have used this idea before in a sermon or two. I know I used it in a brief meditation for the conference pastors when they were here at Grace last November. So bear with me if you've heard it before, because I've thought more about it and have more to add after my recent informal refresher course.

To get the connection, you have to remember how the moon landings worked. Three astronauts were launched into space on the top of a Saturn V rocket. Their capsule was on top of the command module, and just under that was the lunar module. Once they were in space, the command module turned around and docked with the lunar module. After the three day trip to the moon, two of the astronauts climbed into the lunar module and went down to land on the moon, while the third astronaut orbited the moon in the command module and waited for the others to return, because only the command module could make the trip back to earth, and only the capsule on the top of it could reenter earth's atmosphere.

So now that you know that, here's how it relates to the church year. As we go round and round the church year cycle year in and year out we are kind of like the command module orbiting round and round the moon. Each time the command module completed an orbit it's pilot could look out and see the Earth – the crew's final destination. But until the lunar module returned and his fellow astronauts were safely back on board he had to go around again, and again. That's like the church year in this way: each time we go around and we come to Christ the King Sunday, we get a glimpse of where things are heading, the end of Jesus' mission, as it were, when all is brought to completion, when everything is made new, when we will reach our final destination in a reunited heaven and earth.

I think there are three things to take away from this analogy. When I have use this before I had only this first one. Christ the King Sunday helps us to keep things in perspective as we spin round the church years. It reminds us of the goal of our lives and of our relationship with God, namely true, authentic, abundant, and everlasting life in community with God, our fellow human beings, and a renewed creation. It is the assurance that all of this has a point and a final destination, that in the end we get to go home where we belong.

The second two takeaways occurred to me only as I dug back into the nitty-gritty of the Apollo program. What jumped out at me first was the detailed descriptions in one of my books, which made me realize just how jam-packed those missions were for all concerned. The command module pilot didn't just wait around while the other two were down on the moon. He had a full schedule of tasks to perform. There were special cameras and scientific instruments that needed to be operated in order to prepare for upcoming missions, to find suitable landing sites for the next crews, and to take detailed readings of the moon for the general scientific purposes. One of the command module pilots talked about being so busy with his tasks that he forgot to eat. The connection to us here is that our lives too are not just about waiting until Jesus comes back. We are given more than enough to do to fill our days, loving one another, caring for those most in need, and proclaiming in word and deed the good news of God's saving work in the world.

The third takeaway for us from the Apollo program is that this was a communal endeavor. One of the things that came out clearly in the movie about Neil Armstrong was his modesty in the face of the media's attempt to make him a hero. "It's a team effort," he told them at one point. And he was right. As crucial as his skill as a pilot was in landing the lunar module – and it was, no doubt about it – there were so many other people who were needed to help him. When the computer's alarms went off on the way to the surface because it was overloaded with all the calculations it had to make, it was the computer team back on earth that was able to tell him quickly what the alarm code meant and how to handle it. You can get a feel for the kind of support the Apollo crews had by Googling the launch scene from the Apollo 13 movie I mentioned earlier. Each system team had to give its "go" for launch or the launch wouldn't happen, and each of them kept an eye on things throughout the mission. And so it is with us. The journey we are on in our life of faith is not a heroic, solitary one. It's a team effort. We are in this together, and we cannot do it without the support of countless brothers and sisters in Christ throughout our lives. That's an important reason we gather here each week. Think of this as mission control, where we touch base again and again with the one who sends us and help each other to stay on task.

So those three things are what we can learn from the Apollo missions for our life of faith: keeping the goal in view, using our time wisely, and supporting one another. But there's one more thing to mention. The Apollo missions were decidedly out of this world. But they were *of* this world. They started and ended here, and their benefits were felt here. All kinds of technological innovations came out of that program. Jesus makes clear, though, in our gospel reading today that his kingdom and his mission are not of this world. The solution to the problem of sin, death, and evil is not something that we can come up with on our own, even in the best of times. For that we are entirely dependent on Jesus' mission into our world for the sake of the world. That mission was accomplished in his death and resurrection. Now he just needs to get home. But the vision of the final book of the Bible, from which our second reading comes, is not that Jesus will take us all up to heaven to live with him there, in spite of what the Christmas song says. This mission ends instead with him bringing heaven to earth. The final vision of the Bible is of the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem, descending to earth where God will come to live with us forever. God's out-of-this-world kingdom comes to reunite heaven and earth and make that our home. May we keep that vision in mind as we swing 'round the church calendar one more time. May we use our time wisely and support one another in our God-given mission. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.