

“The Eagle Has Landed”: Fifty Years After Apollo 11

It took a lot to get any of us away from playing on the beach in Cape Cod, MA during our summer visits to my grandparents’ house many years ago. Unless it was meal time or raining, we were probably outside 80% of the time. But on one Sunday fifty years ago, the marching orders coming from inside the house were unmistakable. “Come inside all of you— now! You do not want to miss this. It is history!” My mother summoned us for the sake of history and because at the time, at least I didn’t know any better. But *per usual* she was right, and thanks to her **I do remember** that day— July 20, 1969. About a month shy of my sixth birthday, **Apollo 11 was landing on the moon** and we gathered to watch. The particulars are extremely foggy in my mind, but those words are seared into my memory: “John, this is history... Watch!”

The lunar module separated from the command module a little before 2:00 p.m. Apollo 11 had entered into a lunar orbit. It seemed that we were watching for a long time in the family room. At 4:17 p.m., the craft touched down on the southwestern edge of the Sea of Tranquility. America heard the famous words “The Eagle has landed,” spoken from the lips of **Neil Armstrong**. “Roger, Tranquility, we copy you on the ground... You’ve got a bunch of guys about to turn blue... They can breathe again!” **Walter Cronkite’s** reaction was one for the ages. By the time (10:56 p.m.) Armstrong uttered his iconic phrase—“That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind”— while stepping onto the moon’s surface, I was fast asleep, blissfully unaware.

I am so thankful to have these memories, faint as they are. Perhaps you too recall the television simulations (obviously, they had no cameras while in flight) and while unable to fully comprehend the significance, neither was I unaware that something important had occurred. Everyone’s reaction spoke volumes that this was huge! It is within the very nature of the human person to seek to know and to test one’s own limits. This is implanted in our very nature- it’s in our DNA, so to speak. From Apollo 11 to Apollo 17 in 1972, **only 12 men** have **actually walked** on the moon— only four are still living. That is elite company to be sure. Among the items left on the surface of the moon was a plaque that read: “Here men from the planet Earth first set foot on the moon—July 1969 A.D.—We came in peace for all mankind.” The psalmist noted (8:4-5): “When I behold your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you set in place —What is man that you should be mindful of him, or the son of man that you should care for him?”

Apollo 8 orbited the moon on **Christmas Eve** December 24, 1968 in what was the most watched television broadcast at the time. During that flight, Astronaut Bill Anders took the iconic **first full-color photo** of planet earth floating in space above the moon. The crew members took turns reading from the book of Genesis while orbiting the moon. The three **read aloud Genesis 1:1-10**, each taking a few verses. “And from the crew of Apollo 8, we close with good night, good luck, a merry Christmas—and God bless all of you, all of you on the good earth.” It was **covered live** by all networks— my, how times have changed. Why should we explore space? NASA rattles off key benefits of space exploration, among them citing “solar panels to implantable heart monitors, from cancer therapy to light-weight materials, and from water-purification systems to improved computing systems and to a global search-and-rescue system.”

Do you enjoy the benefits of **Google Earth**, satellite-based weather forecasts, etc.? Space exploration has made these possible and we forget how primitive technology was in 1969. While computers were instrumental for the flight of Apollo 11, some extremely basic back-up systems were also in place. Did you know that the astronauts travelled with **paper star charts** so that, if necessary, they could **use a sextant** to take star sightings? A sextant? Didn’t 18th century pirates use those? Indeed, but they are still in use in the event of emergencies at the international space station. **Apollo 13** absolutely used one to return safely to earth after shutting down their main command module to conserve precious power.

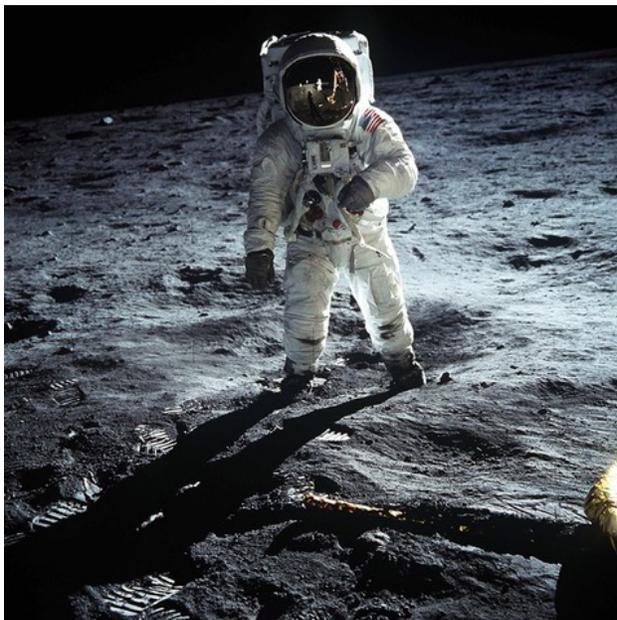
I saw an article noting the decline of the moon landing among television’s “most unforgettable moments,” slipping from #1 to #21 in the past fifty years. If the 1994 O.J. Simpson **Bronco chase** is more “unforgettable” than Neil Armstrong, what does that reveal about American society? Conversely, when in

1999 historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. was asked to name the **most significant events** of the 20th century, he named Apollo 11 as the winner. Why? He was paving the way for something much more significant, noting that in 500 years “Pearl Harbor will be as remote as the War of the Roses.” He added, “The one thing for which this century will be remembered 500 years from now was: This was the century when we began the exploration of space.” For me, it remains among my most treasured memories, brimming with pride as a citizen of this great nation.

- This weekend, we are pleased to welcome Pallottine **Fr. Joseph Koyickal** to the Cathedral. This is our annual missionary appeal weekend. A second collection (separate from Sunday stewardship will be taken up after Holy Communion. All monies collected will be given to the Pallottines for the ministries that Fr. Joseph will speak about at Masses. Thank you for your support.
- The **U.S. Postal Service** will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the flight of Apollo 11 and man’s first steps on the Moon with two Forever stamps. I’m all over that one!
- **Libera**, an outstanding Boys’ Choir (ages 7-16) out of South London, returns here this coming **Friday July 26 at 7:30 p.m.** Their unique sound has delighted audiences for many years. They have sung at World Youth Day as well as for a U.S. President! This ticketed event will be **well worth the price** of admission. Follow the link for ticket information listed on page 7 of the bulletin.
- I loved the story in the Pioneer Press about the **railroad employees** who meticulously restored a 1.2 million lb. locomotive dating to 1941. As we marked 150 years of the Transcontinental Railroad in May, nine skilled pros had labored to restore the 132 ft. locomotive, which made a visit to Saint Paul’s Union Depot last week.
- As we observe **Natural Family Planning Week**, I desire for married couples to know of my esteem for their willingness to embrace this teaching on responsible parenthood. Years from now, when histories are written, I truly believe that Pope Paul VI’s **prophetic stance** on this subject in 1968 will stand out as a moment of courageous clarity in the midst of so much outside pressure to bend to the times.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel
Rector



Pictured above: Astronaut Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin is photographed by Neil Armstrong (himself barely visible in the reflection of the facial shield) using a 70-millimeter Hasselblad camera. This photo is among Time Magazine’s 100 Most Influential Images of All Time.

