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SAINT JOHN'S
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



The Silent Sphere

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Paul Escamilla
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The Silent Sphere

1 Kings 19:9b-12

What happened on the third Sunday of July in 1969? We landed on the moon. “The Eagle has landed!” Some of you remember those words first-hand. Some of you have heard them since. The Eagle has landed. It was a historic moment. That moon landing gave us so much - It gave us an exponentially greater understanding of the moon, of course. It gave us a new and heightened sense of enterprise and adventure. And last, but not least, it gave us the moon walk. I’m going to try and demonstrate that for you now. (*demonstration*) I need a little work on that, don’t I?

The landing was broadcast live on television that Sunday, and Walter Cronkite was at his post. By that time, Walter Cronkite was already a living legend. He had been a journalist forever, it seemed, on radio. He’d covered World War II and the Nuremberg Trials. Then television – he was there for the events surrounding the Kennedy assassination, all through the Vietnam War years, Watergate, Nixon’s resignation, the Iran hostage crisis.

Walter Cronkite became the most trusted man in America. And we know why. Something about his presence, his demeanor. Something about the assurance that capped off that thirty minutes of nightly news, when he said, to end his broadcast, “And that’s the way it is . . .” It wasn’t just the words. It was the feeling that he gave us.

This dean of broadcasting, this veteran of the spoken word, was sitting at his post when the Eagle landed on the moon. And in that moment, when that Eagle touched down on the moon’s surface, he was without words. All he could muster was “Oh, boy!” And then he elaborated on that a bit: “Whooo . . . boy.” That was it. He later apologized for what he considered a lapse in professional demeanor in that moment. But he needn’t have apologized; we understood perfectly well what he was feeling. We were feeling it, too – “Whooo . . . boy.”

Something about the moon . . .

Billions of years old. We don’t know how old. Maybe at one time it was a part of the earth. Or maybe it flew into the earth’s orbit. We don’t know that either. It won’t tell us. The moon is quiet on these subjects. In fact, the moon is quiet all the time. It keeps utter and complete silence. At the same time, it definitely makes its presence known, doesn’t it? Aside from grace itself, the moon is probably the most unimposing and yet thoroughly presence force in our lives.

It's just a satellite of earth a quarter of a million miles away, with no sign of intelligent life anywhere to be found on it. It waxes and wanes, waxes and wanes, over and over. And yet . . . were it to disappear, the earth itself would lose its balance and spin out of its own orbit. The moon commands the tides, sets the date for Easter, stirs up poets and lovers *and* even young believers.

According to legend, a young believer named Francis of Assisi was enjoying a walk one evening through the streets of his town, Assisi, when the moon came into view, a ball of fire vaulting into the sky, lit up like a ball of fire. He's so excited by the sight that he runs to the village church, climbs in the bell tower and rings that church bell for all he's worth. The village people come pouring out of their houses and run toward the church because they know there's only one reason the church bell rings at night time and that's because of some impending crisis or disaster or because of news of a tragedy in the village. They all race to the church, look up at the bell tower, and say, "Francis, what is it?" He calls down, "The moon! Look at the moon!"

Something about the moon . . . That "pearl of great wisdom. Ball of green cheese. And it's burning just like kerosene, it's burning just like kerosene."

This week in Bible School we learned that the moon is like God! The moon is like God because the moon is present even when we can't see it, just as God is there even when we can't see God. And there are times when all we see is the crescent moon. And when we see the crescent moon, there's more there than meets the eye, which is also like our understanding of God.

Remember Tennyson? "Our little systems have their day, they have their day and cease to be. They are but broken lights of Thee, and Thou, O Lord, art more than they."

Always God is more than what we can see or understand about God. The moon, even when it's a full moon, is only showing half of itself, isn't it? And we never see the other side. Due to synchronous rotation the dark side of the moon is always on the dark side. That's kind of like God, too.

We talk about God. We sing about God. We explain God. We theologize about God. And all the while we're envisioning about half the moon. Sometimes we get carried away and talk about God as if we knew the whole of God, as though we'd measured the circumference with a measuring tape, taken snapshots, research samples, carbon tests. But on a good day, we know better. Like Tennyson, we know that our little systems are merely little systems, "broken lights of Thee. And Thou, O Lord, art *more* than they." The moon and God are alike.

There's one more way the moon is like God. We talked about it just a minute ago. The moon never says anything that we can hear with our ears. And God usually operates in silence, too. In the story we heard this week in Bible School, Elijah has a learning experience about this. It is an object lesson that Bill Nye the Science Guy would have been proud to engineer. Elijah is up on Mount Horeb, and all of a sudden a great wind comes his way. Gale force! It's smashing rocks. If there had been pumpkins up there, it would have been smashing them, too. It's fierce and wild and bombastic. And God is not in it.

Then an earthquake comes. And there were more boulders tumbling and rocks smashing. Elijah is rocking back and forth, holding on for dear life. And God was not in the earthquake.

Then there was a fire. Hot and hungry, consuming everything in its path. Scorching, searing, forcing Elijah to turn his face the other way. And God was not in the fire. And then...and then, there was the sound of a still, small voice. In Hebrew, "a sound of fine silence." Have you ever heard the sound of fine silence? And that's where God was.

Why in this object lesson did God become revealed in the silence? Maybe because silence requires something more of us. All those other things do all the work. But when God wants to engage us, in silence, we have to do something. We have to listen. And listening is something we're not always good at, are we? It challenges us, even on a good day. I know we have two ears for every one mouth, but somehow we don't get those percentages just the way we want them all the time.

I was in the hardware store just the other day picking up a few things related to "home improvement," and when I got to the clerk, she looked at me and said with more focus than I'm used to, "Hello, how are you today?" Well, I was kind of surprised at the intention in her voice, but I went with it. I said, "I'm fine, thank you very much. And how are you today?" She started scanning my items and said, without looking up, "I'm fine, thanks. How are you today?"

For a moment, I thought I should answer, "I'm fine. How are you today?" But I behaved myself.

Parents, on average, we spend less than ten minutes a day listening to our children. Now I hope the parents in this room raise that average way up. A report published by the Kaiser Family Foundation earlier this year indicates that school-age children and youth are engaged with electronic devices seven and a half hours a day. Now, I hope, the youth and children in this room take that average way, way down. There's so much in 3-D, real life,

real time to be experienced beyond those electronic things that are also such fun. Just as, parents, there is so, so much for us to hear in our children's narrating of life that can be told no better (or more honestly) than anywhere else.

I wonder, sometimes, if those two statistics play off against each other. I'm afraid they do. We are a society that doesn't always slow down to listen as well as we'd like to. Scott Peck once wrote, "The principal form that love takes is attention." Attention.

Are you giving attention? To your children? Children, youth - are you giving attention to your parents? To your friends? To your world? Husbands, you know where I'm going. I had a friend who had a bumper sticker that said, "My wife says I never listen to her...or something like that." Now, in his case, it was funny because it wasn't true. He wasn't that kind of a husband, and we don't want to be, either. Are you giving your wives attention? And wives, your husbands? Friends? Partners?

And people of faith, are we paying attention to the wider world? Its hurts? Its cries? Sometimes they're silent, but they're always there. Our senior highs have been paying attention to those cries this past week. Our junior high youth, in the coming week, will be. Are we listening to those voices, those messages?

Let me suggest three things that we might do as steps to getting into better proportion that one mouth/two ears ratio with which we've been gifted. Take a walk in the company of the moon tonight. You can do that before dusk or after dark, the moon is high both times. It's a beautiful lemon wedge of a moon right now. On your walk have a conversation with God and see what ensues. Be certain it's a two-way conversation. It could be two or three minutes, or five or twenty. It could be with children or spouses or all alone. Find time to be away soon. To get away and be in conversation with God.

Second, families - make silence with your children sometime soon. We tried it this week and it was fabulous. Your children are really, really good at making silence. This is how it works. You get settled down somewhere quiet, and then slowly count to three. After three . . . silence. And you're quiet for as long as the Spirit moves you, listening for that "fine silence" that is the voice, the way, the guiding of God. The gift of silence when we're with other people is a sublime gift to give one another. Families can do it; you can do it by yourself as well.

So find your way into the company of the moon. Find some time to make silence as a family or even alone. And then, finally, in your prayers, whatever form your prayers tend to take, practice speaking just a little less and listening just a little more. Praying is easiest when we're talking, isn't it? It's a lot harder to pray in silence, to listen while we're

praying. In your own prayers, plug the bucket; stop the words for just a little while and carve out space for silence.

As you're listening in the silence, listen for your own story. Listen for your hopes and yearnings and hurts and healings. Listen for the blessings and abundance in your life. Listen for the needs of those in your circle of love and care. Listen for the cries of others that we don't know, silent or strong, for mercy or for justice. Listen to the Spirit, working that loom to weave all these things together in our hearts to a place of conviction and vocation and assurance.

When we listen to the silence, seeking God, what we always end up learning in addition is something about ourselves. Deep calls to deep, and in those moments of sacred extrusion we see things we've never seen before.

It was exactly two years after "the Eagle landed" on the moon that the command module for Apollo 15 was orbiting the moon with Alfred Worden as its pilot. He was journaling at the time, and wrote these words, "Now I know why I've come here. Not for a closer look at the moon, but for a closer look at our home – the earth." I want us to be able to say the same thing as we walk away from a prayer time, a time of silence. Now I know why I came here, not because I wanted to study some mystery beyond me that I'll never be able to fully fathom, but because I wanted a closer look at God's Spirit working in my own life, in the lives of my loved ones, my church family, my community, my world.

Are you ready for that voyage? That odyssey that takes us far away so that we may better know and love what is near and dear? Here we go: One . . . two . . . three . . .