

Nothing Routine

(About the Scope of Advent's Mission)

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said . . .
(Hebrews 10:5)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the First Sunday of Advent, **December 3, 2017**
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Forty-five Advent's ago, December 14, 1972, the crew of the Apollo 17 Lunar Landing Module, Commander Eugene Cernan and geologist Harrison Schmitt, lifted off the lunar surface to initiate their return to earth. These were the last astronauts to add footprints to the dusty lunar surface. We haven't been back.

It had only been three years earlier, that memorable summer of 1969, that Neil Armstrong spoke the words, "*The Eagle has landed,*" as Apollo 11's landing module touched down on the moon's surface. We frequented the moon between 1969 and 1972, but no American under forty-five years old has been alive for the ADVENT-ure of a manned flight to the moon.

Space adventures don't garner the saturated news coverage they once did. I suspect, for example, most here are unaware of this coming Friday's launch from Cape Canaveral on a cargo mission to rendezvous with the International Space Station. I doubt, also, that any here are anxiously waiting our next manned space adventure launching two weeks from today, December 17. Called Expedition 54, this mission will carry a new crew to the ISS -- an American, a Russian, and a Japanese astronaut.

Did you know about these imminent launches? No? I didn't know, either. 54 is a high number, after all. With so many expeditions, it's hard to keep up. No, but I checked the NASA website. I loved a caption on the site, playing on one of the most famous statements from NASA history, "*Houston, we have a problem.*" It said, "*Houston, we have a Podcast.*"

NASA didn't have a podcast in the 60s. Didn't need one, either, since everyone followed the space race. For people my age and older names like John Glenn, Alan Shepard, Scott Carpenter, Gordon Cooper, Gus Grissom were celebrity's names. These astronauts (from the Greek, *Space Sailor*) were *The Right Stuff*. Heroes, these men, known far and wide. After the Mercury program came Gemini, then Apollo -- names we knew well. We watched. Did we ever watch!

Strangely enough, though, even by 1970 -- a mere year after the first moon landing with Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin -- some wondered if a trip to the moon could even be called an adventure anymore. Success with the Apollo program happened so often it was beginning to seem routine. In the summer of 1969 Neil Armstrong, Apollo 11 Commander, thrilled the world as he made "*one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.*" Apollo missions had been

and were frequent, one after another until, seemingly, NASA had it all down pat, each new mission promising a sure-fire success, a slam dunk. Had going to the moon become *Routine*?

When the three Apollo 13 astronauts held their pre-launch news conference, one reporter asked if moonwalks weren't now so common as to be hardly newsworthy. "*There just doesn't seem to be any drama and adventure anymore. Moon missions are about as exciting as a trip to Pittsburgh!*" Astronaut Jim Lovell, played by Tom Hanks in the 1995 Ron Howard directed film *Apollo 13*, stepped to the microphone to make the statement from which I derive my theme for this year's Advent season at COH. "*I assure you,*" Commander Lovell said, "*there's Nothing Routine about going to the moon.*"

I'm going to take Commander Lovell's words, *Nothing Routine*, as my theme for Advent 2017. It fits, I think, because the launch of this Divine mission – *The Son of Man come to seek and save the lost* -- was nothing less than Earth-shaking. Speaking of earth-shaking. Click on the link below to watch the amazing "*Go Flight*" scene from *Apollo 13*, capturing Apollo 13's lift-off aboard the powerful Saturn V rocket (this image shows that launch on April 11, 1970). I recall seeing Apollo 13 in the theatre, the "*Go for Flight*" assessment of each department as Ed Harris (playing Flight Director Gene Kranz) went through the final checklist asking for a "*Go-No Go*" declaration. When the Countdown reached zero, I yet recall the seats of the theatre shaking with the rumble of the powerful engines.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMtWWls4oas>

What does this have to do with Advent? I think our text describes the "*Go - No Go*" moment for the divine ADVENT - ure, the liftoff for a divine mission with a scope of redemption that would be *Nothing Routine*. When the writer of Hebrews says, "*So when Christ came into the world, he said . . .*" it seems to take us to a time prior to Christ's departure on his redemptive mission, the "*Go Flight*" moment. "*When Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifices and offering you did not desire, but a body you have prepared for me.'*" That virgin-born body was soon to be home to the Son of God, "*The Word made flesh.*"

Apollo 13's pre-launch conference was in a room crowded with reporters, the podium thick with microphones and clicking cameras waiting to record the heroes' words of courage, determination, and daring. Our text seems to describe a similar scene played out in heaven. As the Son of God embarks on the divine journey he makes a pre-launch statement, "*Sacrifices and offerings you did not desire, but a body you have prepared for me.*" Imagine the fanfare of angels surrounding the one Hebrews calls the *Captain (Commander) of our Salvation* as he prepares for his odyssey. This was no small step. Even for deity it was a giant leap from heaven to shepherd-clustered Bethlehem, an act of heroism which would be an eternal source of wonder and worship.

No, there was *Nothing Routine* about this divine journey, though Hebrews opens with a suggestion that the sending of divine messengers had become, in fact, very routine. “*God, who in various times and in many and various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son.*” Messengers from God? What could be more routine? Since the Greek word for messenger is *angelos* (angel), let’s call this series of divine messengers the “*Angelos*” program. Instead of Apollo 1, Apollo 2, etc., we have Angelos 1, Angelos 2, Angelos 3. The bible tells the story of those ambassadors from God. Abraham. Moses. Isaiah. Elijah. John the Baptist. Over and over. Again and again. The Levitical priestly line was the epitome of this routine. Hebrews 10 opens with the priests faithfully doing their ritual duties, a routine flow of the blood of bulls and goats. The continuity of their work is expressed in such phrases as *over and over, year after year, standing and performing*. Why, it’s about as exciting as a trip to Pittsburgh!

I think it interesting that among the furniture of the tabernacle there was something missing. The menorah was there, a symbol of our need for light. And the basin, a symbol of our need for moral cleanliness as we approach God. There was also the table of shewbread, symbolizing God’s abundant provision. But there was *no chair, no couch*. In the tabernacle there was not a single piece of furniture to suggest rest. Why? Well, perhaps because the priest’s work was never done. From one Yom Kippur to the next Yom Kippur, year after year, the people’s sin required atonement, and it was the priest’s function to work, perpetually and routinely, *seeking appeasement and pardon*. Not just Expedition 54, but Expedition 5778 (the current Hebrew year according to ancient tradition as dated from Creation),

The Good News is that Christ broke that routine. The Son of God came to offer one sacrifice for sin forever. Finished now would be the *over and over* efforts of priests *standing and performing, standing and performing*. No chair. No couch. Until Jesus. After his one sacrifice Jesus victoriously did what no priest could, “*He sat down at the right hand of God.*” No, there is *Nothing Routine* in the person and work of the Christ. He alone could whisper the word of victory, *tetelestai*, “*It is finished.*”

Now, when Jim Lovell said there was *Nothing Routine* about this moon *Adventure*, he spoke more than he knew, for he was about to become a central figure in a drama of danger that captivated the world. “*Houston, we have a problem,*” Commander Lovell famously said, as an explosion in deep space rendered the mission in grave danger. And when the danger was at its peak, threatening to take the life of our three astronauts, to the rescue came . . . duct tape.

Apollo 13 is history’s most famous duct-tape-to-the-rescue story. Our astronauts were able to get back to earth thanks, in part, to duct tape, NASA engineers in Houston dumping onto a table everything the spacecraft had on board to try and configure a working carbon dioxide scrubber to keep the astronauts alive. The late Ed Smylie, the Mississippi State trained NASA mission control engineer who designed the scrubber modification for the crippled craft, said in an interview that he knew the problem was solvable when it was confirmed that duct tape was on the spacecraft: “*I felt like we were home free,*” he said. “*One thing a Southern boy will never say is 'I don't think duct tape will fix it.'*” Simply put, if duct tape is not on board Apollo 13 in 1970, we may not get our *Space Sailors* back from the wilderness of space.

Still, duct tape is a temporary fix. I doubt carbon dioxide filter design aboard today's spacecraft is patterned after the bizarre contraption Commander Lovell and his crew patched together. In that observation, I think, is a wonderful Advent lesson. I suggest the Old Testament sacrifices may be regarded as year-by-year, survival-oriented patch jobs. Over and over. Again and again. Standing and performing.

In the same year as this launch, 1970, I turned 16 years old and bought my first car. Everybody remembers their first car, right? I'll countdown from three to zero, and at zero I want everybody at the same time to call out your first car. Ready? 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . GO. **This was fun as the entire congregation played in a cacophony of remembrances.*

My first car, purchased about the same time as the Apollo 13 launch, was a 1963 Ford Fairlane. I remember well that it had a leaky radiator hose upon which I wrapped layer after layer after messy layer of duct tape, each new layer a temporary fix. I knew, though, that at some point all those layers would have to be cleaned away and new material used.

Advent, I think, celebrates how Christ came to scissor away all the previous duct tape wrappings of atonement. *"God has abolished the first in order to establish the second. Now we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Christ, once for all."* Grand words, those. *"Once for all!"* With those word the cycle of redemption which necessarily repeated itself over and over, layer upon annual layer of messy sacrifice of bulls and goats, was finished.

No, there was *Nothing Routine* about this ADVENT – ure, *Nothing Routine* about the Scope of Advent's Mission, which was to restore our hope by ending the cycle of repetitive redemption – Once and for All – with a redemption accomplished and applied through Jesus Christ.

I hope your Advent 2017 will be an experience that is *Nothing Routine*.

