

“We’re Breathing Again!”
(Does the Church Need a Frontier to Thrive?)

“When the day of Pentecost had come . . .”
(Acts 2:1a)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on Pentecost Sunday, **May 20, 2018**
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Christ of the Hills UMC, 700 Balearic Drive, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909

In this morning’s Hymn of Praise, Isaac Watt’s powerful hymn, *“I Sing the Almighty Power of God,”* we sang,

*“Lord, how thy wonders are displayed, where’er I turn my eye,
if I survey the ground I tread, or gaze upon the sky.”*

Have you *“gazed upon the sky”* this week, head tilted upward? Liturgically speaking, our eyes were turned skyward ten days ago, Ascension Thursday (the 40th day after Easter). The book of Acts opens with Luke, its author, telling the story of Jesus’ Ascension from the Mount of Olives, the disciples’ eyes following Jesus into heaven. *“Men of Galilee,”* they heard, *“why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”*

Last Sunday, Ascension Sunday, I had the privilege of leading our Gathering service to consider that theme, surveying several works of art from the 15th to the 20th centuries, in order to see the various ways the Ascension has been imagined – from Paulo Veronese in Venice, to Rembrandt to Salvador Dali and more. This led me to invite those gathered to imagine how they might have painted the Ascension? As for me, I imagine it with heads tilted back and eyes skyward.

This posture continues for ten days of waiting. Today is that tenth day, which Luke describes in Acts 2, Pentecost. *“When the day of Pentecost had come”* carries a sense of a beginning, a frontier opening for expansion of the church in its mission and ministry. It would be just as Jesus had promised, that when the Spirit came upon the disciples the church would be empowered to go into *“Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the world.”*

I want to tell you about an Ascension Day I experienced several years ago, in 2012. I was the guest lecturer for a group of about 120 on a faith-based cruise of the Mediterranean following the Journeys of Paul. As it happened, our visit to Venice fell on Ascension Day, May 17, 2012. I had offered a devotional on ship that morning about the head tilted up experience of Ascension. Little did I know we were about to experience a very real such moment upon entering St. Mark’s Basilica near Venice’s Grand Canal.

St. Mark’s is one of the finest examples of Byzantine architecture in the world, its first building constructed in 828 A.D. This image scarcely does justice to the gleaming ceiling and walls of the ancient basilica. From the moment we crossed the threshold with the throng of thousands

assembled in the piazza, as if by reflex all heads tilted back, casting eyes upward at a ceiling covered in a mosaic of gold. It seems impossible not to immediately look up at the mosaics picturing events of the New Testament, covering the ceiling with an estimated 37 million tiles over 64,000 square feet.

The dome you partially see here (in the middle of the image with the windows letting in light) is the Pentecost dome. The 12 disciples are seated in a circle (you see only six of them here) receiving fire from heaven as the breath of God coming upon them. The windows enhance the feeling that at Pentecost the church was breathing fresh air.



Imagine. Jesus had been gone for ten days. The disciples were waiting, holding their breath, as it were, turning blue. Now, they are breathing again as frontiers of opportunity beckon them out of the circle, through those open windows and into the world.

This week in American history is the anniversary of another time when Americans cast their eyes toward the sky. I don't mean spiritually, but rather scientifically and patriotically. This Friday, May 25, will be the 57th anniversary of one of the most famous visionary speeches of any American president. On that day in 1961 President John F. Kennedy declared his commitment to the Apollo space program in a speech titled, "*Urgent National Needs.*" Billed as a second State of the Union message, four months after his first State of the Union, his simple message to Congress was that the U.S. faced extraordinary challenges and needed to respond extraordinarily. He said: "*I believe this nation should commitment itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth. No single space project in this period will be more impressive to mankind, or more important for the long-range exploration of space; and none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish.*" For Americans it was a head-tilted back moment requiring a frontier spirit of daring.

Fast-forward with me through the ten years of the decade of the 60's so that I might offer a word about my title, "*We're breathing again.*" These words were heard by millions of Americans 49 summers ago. In July 1969 Americans huddled around mostly black and white television sets to hear reports from Walter Cronkite describing one of the most astounding accomplishments in human history. As turbulent as the 60s may have been, drawing our eyes to the many challenges

around us, all eyes were looking upward when, on July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin brought the lunar module, after an unexpectedly dramatic descent, safely to rest on the moon's surface. Many will recall Neil Armstrong's famous words, "*Houston, Tranquility base here. The Eagle has landed.*"

It was then that Charles Duke, CAPCOM at Mission Control during the landing phase, famously acknowledged, "*Roger, Twank . . . Tranquility, we copy you on the ground. You got a bunch of guys about to turn blue here. We're breathing again.*"

You will likely have heard the wonderful story of what happened next, and I could wish it were Holy Communion Sunday as I share with you Buzz Aldrin's description of that historic moment. "*Now Neil and I were sitting inside Eagle, while Mike circled in lunar orbit, unseen in the black sky above us. In a little while, after our scheduled meal period, Neil would give the signal to step down the ladder onto the powdery surface of the moon. So I unstowed the elements in their flight packets. I put them and the scripture reading on the little table in front of the abort guidance system computer.*

"Then I called back to Houston, 'Houston, this is Eagle. This is LM Pilot speaking. I would like to request a few moments of silence. I would like to invite each person listening in, wherever and whomever he may be, to contemplate for a moment the events of the past few hours and to give thanks in his own individual way.'

"For me, this meant taking Communion. In the blackout I opened the little plastic packages which contained bread and wine. I poured wine into the chalice my parish had given me. In the one-sixth gravity of the moon, the wine curled slowly and gracefully up the cup. It was interesting to think that the very first liquid ever poured on the moon, and the first food eaten there, were consecrated elements. Just before I partook of the elements I read the words which I had chosen to indicate our trust that as man probes into space, we are in fact acting in Christ. I sensed especially strongly my unity with our church back home, and with the Church everywhere. I read, 'I am the Vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me.'"

So it is that scripture and sacrament became part of the saga of space exploration. Three days later, the night before splashdown in their return home, the three astronauts made a televised broadcast. Aldrin said, "*This has been far more than three men on a mission to the moon; more, still, than the efforts of a government and industry team; more, even, than the efforts of one nation. We feel that this stands as a symbol of the insatiable curiosity of all mankind to explore the unknown. Personally, in reflecting on the events of the past several days, a verse from psalms comes to mind . . . 'When I consider the heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which you have ordained; What is man that you are mindful of him?'*"

With Psalm 8 Aldrin was celebrating humanity's calling and ability to tilt their heads up and cast their eyes heavenward, as surely as our eyes looked upward when we crossed the threshold of St. Mark's Basilica. An essential part of our being human is the ability to cast our eyes above us and to step into the frontier with a sense that the ability to imagine places us on the periphery of God

likeness. At what moment in history has humanity's imagining been quite so vivid as when human footprints were first left in lunar dust?

The success of Apollo 11 in the summer of 1969 was a hopeful conclusion to a decade filled with division, American eyes turned, not heavenward, but inward in introspection, on the unpleasant ground we then trod, wondering what we had become and at what we were becoming. The Civil Rights struggle. The clamor surrounding Vietnam. The Cold War with growing threat of nuclear annihilation. The Cuban missile crisis. A triad of assassinations of American public figures: President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy. In contrast to these 60s, NASA had the "*Right Stuff*" to take our eyes off the toxic swirl of domestic agonies and, fixing our gaze skyward, lift us from the morass. Like entering St. Mark's, what could one do in the summer of 1969 but immediately look up and, in looking up, find ourselves breathing again.

It seemed Apollo 11 would become a launching pad toward even more daring accomplishments in space, which is why many have wondered at the low-earth orbit strategy of the last nearly fifty years, feeling the frontier slipping away. I read a *Wall Street Journal* article some years ago picturing of those three Apollo 11 astronauts, all then in their 70s and each suggesting that we need a new frontier, urging NASA toward not returning to the moon and beyond, to Mars.

Both of these goals, as you may know, are very much in the arena of scientific and public discourse just now. As many wonderful things as have been achieved in space through the Shuttle program, many wondered at our lack of a challenging frontier for human space exploration. One pundit wrote, "*We were once a breakthrough people, a nation with a mission to push beyond ourselves. In this age of soft narcissism, we just circle ourselves . . . an endless loop, going round and round and looking down at . . . us.*"

Charles Krauthammer offered haunting words, a spin on Caesar's famed words – "Veni, Vidi, Vici" (We came. We saw. We conquered.), writing, "*We came. We saw. We retreated. How could we?*" Why, he asked, have we chosen to circle ourselves in a hyper-terrestrial phase.

Now, I don't know if that's a fair summary of our space program and its struggle over the last decades to answer questions about what's next in human space exploration. Many amazing things have happened through ISS and the Shuttle. Still, the idea of circling ourselves offers intriguing analysis on the state of any entity – be it an individual, a business, a church, or a country. Is the culture of divisiveness we see inevitable as a result of constant introspection, gazing at ourselves rather than up? We live in a culture whose frontiers are found in words like iPod, Facebook, and Instagram -- social networking.

How different these words for the human spirit than words like Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo. Those words had us breathing again, offering windows into the frontier of the possible! Our words, I think, can suffocate, as we wrap ourselves with ourselves. If our task is to look at ourselves, we've become very, very good at it. How shall we breathe again?

A favorite book of mine is Robert Zubrin's *The Case for Mars: The Plan to Settle the Red Planet and Why We Must*. I read it 21 years ago in 1997, the year after it was released. Zubrin,

an American aerospace engineer, opens by describing a speech at the annual conference of the American Historical Association by a young professor of history from the University of Wisconsin. *“In one bold sweep (Frederick Jackson Turner) presented a brilliant insight into the basis of American society and the American character. It was not legal theories, traditions, national or racial stock that was the source of America’s egalitarian democracy, individualism, and spirit of innovation, he said. It was the existence of the frontier.”*

“To the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics,” Turner said. *“That coarseness of strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grip of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy . . . these are traits of the frontier, traits called out . . . because of the existence of the frontier.”*

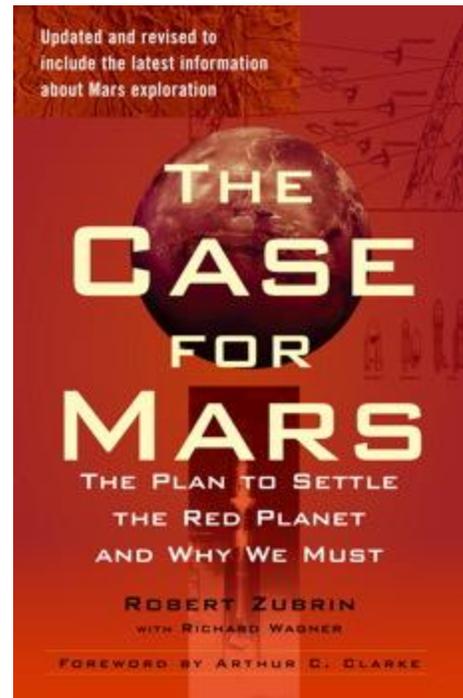
Turner offered that speech in 1893! Just three years earlier the American frontier had officially been declared closed, the line of settlement of westward expansion had actually met the line of settlement coming east from California. Zubrin, a full century later, suggested that we face the question Turner posed: *“What if the frontier is truly gone? What happens to America? Can a free, egalitarian, innovating society survive in the absence of (a frontier)?”*

He wrote, *“Without a frontier from which to breathe new life, the spirit that gave rise to the . . . culture that America has represented for the past two centuries is fading. Human progress needs a vanguard . . . I believe humanity’s new frontier can only be Mars.”*

Now, whether you agree and think Mars a frontier worth striving for is of no consequence. Mars is hardly my point. My point, rather, is that we need something to tilt our heads upward, away from ourselves. To breathe again, we need a frontier.

Does the church need a frontier to thrive? Our dilemma, it seems to me, is circling ourselves. Looking at the Mainline churches of America, many see a slow choking off of vital energies, a church turning blue – waiting, waiting, waiting. How then might we hear the words, *“We’re Breathing Again?”*

I see the church’s journey as parallel to the journey of NASA, by which I mean our glory days are those in which we manifested a pioneer mentality. And, like NASA, we can recover that mentality, so that we reemerge as a vital, frontier-oriented entity, rather than calcifying into a museum. How many times can one sit through a General Conference evoking deep frustration by spending an inordinate amount of time debating procedure, which is to say, debating the rules of debating -- circling, circling, circling ourselves in an orbit without bold vision.



What will get us breathing again? No wonder United Methodists speak with such reverence of the “*circuit rider*” days, when the existence of the frontier called forth a different set of skills in church leaders than those hailed now as essential. As we gradually transitioned into a Main Street mentality, risk-taking became a smaller and smaller part of the equation.

Perhaps Pentecost is time to remind ourselves that the church’s ability to breathe again will be found in direct relationship to our exploration of new frontiers -- not in land and space, but in spirit and mission, lest we become expert only in circling ourselves.

To be sure, each local church must measure its dreams in accordance with its environment, its mission field, and its potential resources to reach that mission field. Budget concerns are real and limiting, for the church as for NASA, but the choices we make as a congregation can’t as a matter of reflex be made only with respect to what we can comfortably do, what we sense we can accomplish without risk.

To breathe again we need to be challenged by a frontier. May we never need say of United Methodism, nor of Christ of the Hills United Methodist Church, “*We came. We saw. We retreated. How could we?*”