



ELIZABETHTOWN  
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Moonshot,  
Failure is not an option*

Hebrews 12.1–3

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On this 50th anniversary year of the first lunar landing we are taking some time to look at the challenges and achievements of this historic milestone and what it may offer us when we consider our own faith journey as individuals and as a collective body. This morning, we are continuing this “Moonshot” series with an exploration into the hard work that is required and the failures that are inevitable in any attempt to do big things.

There are people here this morning like myself, who were too young or not alive to remember the “Space Race” of the 1960’s, and others here who were still in the early stages of their lives when this was all happening. Either way, it is hard to overstate how incredibly ambitious and challenging it was to consider landing a person on the moon when it was proposed by President Kennedy to congress in May of 1961. Many perceived this rhetoric as reactionary to the successes of the Soviet Union who had beaten the US into space with the Sputnik satellite a few years earlier and recently place the first human into space, Russian cosmonaut, Yuri Garigan, just a few weeks earlier. This announcement was also coming on the heels of the embarrassing Bay of Pigs fiasco, and so at the time, many believed that such a declaration about sending a person to the moon was more bluster than reality.

It is easy for us to sit here 50 years later and believe that going to the moon was always an inevitability, but we should keep in mind that in 1960 it had only been a little more than 40 years since humans had first figured out how to just fly across the Atlantic ocean in a propeller airplane. Sending someone to the moon in 9 years was understood by many to be impossible. And yet, in 1969 the impossible was done.

This goal was achieved because it was prioritized with billions of dollars and millions of hours of work were obsessively poured into this goal. There are very convincing arguments questioning the merits of spending that much money and effort on a moon landing during a time of great poverty and inequality in the United States. It is a valuable question to ask what else could have perhaps been achieved with that same

2 focus and effort applied elsewhere. And, while I cannot say if such a mission was pleasing to God, it is clear that sending a man to the moon was captivating enough to harness the will power, and energy of the people required to make it happen.

If nothing else, it is a testament to the capacities and abilities of the God given talents that humanity possesses when it sets out to achieve a goal. It stands as a reminder to us about what we are able to achieve. It is difficult to fathom the entire industry and systems that had to be developed and created around this project in order to make the mission successful. Incredible effort was put forward, unwavering commitment and desire. Achievements were built on the backs of predecessors and many failures. Going to the moon did not just happen, it was grinded out every step of the way.

Which brings us to the scripture for today... Hebrews 12:1-3, I have chosen the message paraphrase this morning because I found the text to be particularly relevant...

### **HEBREW 12:1-3**

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*Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!*

Don't we all want some of that! Right? Shoot some adrenaline into our souls! What does that for you? What helps to create joy and excitement in your faith journey? Is your faith and desire to follow Jesus like that? Or has it become so unchallenging that it is boring? Has it become too safe that it feels stale and lifeless? Does your faith feel like it has adrenaline pumped in to it? We see here that "When you find yourselves flagging

in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through.”

In these Verses from Hebrews the author is imploring us as Christians to press on, to work hard to accept the challenges and sacrifices that are required in following Jesus and to also look back on the whole story... In the previous chapter, Chapter 11 there is a litany of biblical heroes, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the list goes on and on recording their successes, as well as challenges and failures. They are the “Cloud of Witnesses” of Hebrews 12 or as we had read in the message the “pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on.”

In the previous chapter of Hebrew Chapter 11 verses 13–16, again from The Message this is what is said about them...

### **HEBREWS 11:13–16**

*Each one of these people of faith died not yet having in hand what was promised, but still believing. How did they do it? They saw it way off in the distance, waved their greeting, and accepted the fact that they were transients in this world. People who live this way make it plain that they are looking for their true home. If they were homesick for the old country, they could have gone back any time they wanted. But they were after a far better country than that— heaven country.*

What is this “Heaven Country” that God is calling us towards? This is not simply about a place where we go after we die, but the world that lies before us here on Earth. What **moonshots** will get us there? What work will need to be done? What sacrifices will be required of us? What trials and challenges will we encounter along the way? This journey will not happen by accident, it will require the same hard work and dedication that we have seen from this “cloud of witnesses” that has come before us.

We can look at the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo Space missions as examples of what it takes to press on and move forward towards a difficult goal. Before stepping onto a rocket ship, astronauts were put through an almost unimaginable

4 number of test scenarios and practice runs, that covered just about every possible malfunction or problem that could occur. Thousands of people had worked to cobble together redundancies and fail-safes that were repeatedly tested and stressed and retested over and over again. They were able to learn through trial and error, able to learn through mistakes and failures.

We too, are called to live our lives as Christians in such a way that we are constantly honing and refining our faith. Learning from our interactions with one another, showing love and kindness in situations where we are unsure of how things will turn out. It is interesting that we use the term “practice” when we discuss what we do with our faith. We practice our faith. We put it into action and sometimes it does not seem to work the way we imagine it would. But the more we seek to press on, the more we are willing to stretch ourselves and grow in the ways of Jesus, the better prepared we will be for the difficult situations that come our way. The more we strive to “run with perseverance and fix our eyes on Jesus” as Hebrews says, with all of the little things, the more fit we will be to handle the big things.

In April of 1970 Apollo 13 set out for a lunar landing as the previous two missions had successfully completed. Unfortunately, as they were approaching the moon there was a malfunction that caused an oxygen tank to explode. Very quickly this became a serious problem that threatened the lives of the three astronauts on board. Due to the extensive amount of training and practice, the astronauts and ground control in Houston were able to troubleshoot a number of possible issues. But even with all of their preparation they were still required to “think outside the box” and generate solutions that had not been previously conceived. Even when faced with unforeseen challenges, the type and amount of training that they had gone through prepared them for handling that new challenge. Knowing that they were equipped and prepared made it possible for them to operate under an ethos that “Failure is not an Option”.

As individuals, as a congregation and as a people of God, if we seek to confront the many challenges that face humanity and achieve any kind of “Moonshot” successes, we must be ready to do the hard work. We must be willing to practice and prepare our hearts and minds for compassion towards those whom we disagree, for perseverance when situations are difficult, for creativity and openness to confront new challenges and wisdom to discern a path forward. It can begin with the simplest of things, like daily disciplines of prayer or devotions, biting our tongues when provoked, offering and accepting forgiveness, demonstrating patience or showing abundant kindness. There is a popular saying that offers some insight into how smaller intentional acts and “practices” influence our broader behavior and decision making. “The way you do anything is the way you do everything”. If we seek to exemplify Christlike living in sacrifice, humility, love and compassion we must be willing to suffer those acts in our everyday lives.

And while it may be true that there is often struggle and pain that comes along with being faithful to the way of Jesus, it is important to recognize this does not require living a joyless and miserable existence. As so many in this congregation have discovered through a lifelong commitment to service, there is great joy that comes with service and sacrifice to others. I have often come to discover that God seems to have created the framework of the universe in such a way that serving God even through sacrificial acts often comes with its own rewards. Many of us know this deeply, that our greatest joys and memories often come from experiences uniquely tied to following God’s call to love one another or dwelling in christlike community and situations, even when it is not easy.

Sometimes this requires trying something new or even risking failure. As a church and as individuals we are faced with opportunities to try and explore new things together. Perhaps you have been hesitant to participate in a Sunday school class on Sunday morning. Maybe there is an opportunity for you to join a group like Women’s Bible Study, the Men’s Breakfast, you could volunteer in Children’s Sunday School or VBS, join

6 the choir or help with technology on Sunday mornings. As a church, we are moving forward together on a journey with our building project and will also be taking a risk with the start of a new Small Group program. We must continue to cultivate a posture of being bold in our faith if we seek to genuinely follow Jesus.

Last week when I was leading Children's Church, we spent some time talking about potential "moonshot" ideas that seem impossible but would be in line with how God calls us to live and make this world a better place. Some of the ideas they came up with included, stopping all wars between countries and nations, creating a machine that turned all trash or waste into food or usable goods for all people who are hungry or don't have belongings. Getting rid of weapons. Stopping all people from smoking, and committing to not letting any more plants and animals go extinct. They had some creative ideas and some real hope for the future.

I must admit that when I consider the current state of affairs in our nation and around the world, the anger, the divisiveness, the embrace of bias, the gleeful acceptance of combativeness, along with all of the negative trend lines associated with climate change and overconsumption, it is easy for me to slump into pessimism.... But change is rarely inspired by pessimism... some moonshots might be forged in fear but they are only achieved through hope.

The Story of Jesus, Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Paul, Alexander Mack, the story of many of our own relatives and predecessors, of past members of this congregation, other churches, even of other faiths, any number of the "Cloud of Witnesses" that have come before us, all their stories contain hope. Perhaps not achieved in their own lifetimes but passed forward as a gift, as an opportunity for us to take the reins to dream new dreams, achieve new goals until we pass the baton on ourselves. These things do not happen on their own. They require us to press forward, to run the race and make our faithfulness and the way of Jesus a priority in our lives. Because when we take our eye off the prize or change our



focus opportunities and achievements can easily slip away and lose momentum.

On the night of Niel Armstrong's Moon landing, people went to sleep and dreamed of moon bases and going to Mars, no one would have believed you if you told them that by 2020 almost 50 years later, no one would have been back to the moon after the Apollo missions. Given the myriad of social and economic problems facing Americans, I am not suggesting that we should have continued to commit to the space program in the same way we did in the 60's, but it is amazing to consider the drastic change that came with adjusting priorities.

One aspect of success is that it recalibrates what we understand to be exceptional and special. While the Apollo 12 mission was just as technically challenging and impressive as Apollo 11, hardly anyone knows that Pete Conrad and Alan Bean walked on the moon just a few months after Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, I certainly did not know and had to look up their names. But, another thing about progress is that it raises the bar, it forces one to reimagine what is possible. It pushes us forward towards better circumstances and often higher standards of justice. It is what makes us look back on history, and even at times scripture, and recoil at oppression that was once commonly accepted. This progress, the many seemingly impossible moonshots achieved require constant effort in which God is always calling us forward towards bigger and better things, even things that may seem unachievable.

One of the reasons the moonshot was successful was because it was just so ambitious, it captivated imagination because it was so (pardon the pun) "Other Worldly". But isn't that also what we are called to as Christians? Called to be in this world but not "of" this world? Perhaps ambition is part of the reason for the success of our faith as well; its idealism, its optimism and its commitment to achieve what seems impossible. I know within the Church of the Brethren I grew up hearing the phrase "Another way of Living". This is a challenge to all of us, not to be conformed by this world but to follow our

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call to love God and love one another, even when, especially when it is difficult. Not only do we do this on Sunday mornings but are called to practice our faith all day, every day so that when we are faced with difficult situations we can react in the way of Jesus. We prepare in our faith in such a way that when it comes to following Jesus “Failure is not an Option”.

I spent this past week directing Youth Resident Camp at Camp Swatara, and like the children of this church they too offer me optimism and hope for the future. Camp for me has always been a place to “practice faith” a place to experience a Christlike community, one of those thin places that seems to provide access to God in ways that aren’t so easy elsewhere. Perhaps you can think of places or situations like that in your life, this church is a thin place for many.

Given how special camp is to many of these Youths, the end of the week often comes with tears and sadness as they contemplate returning to the real world. The challenge that I offered to them at sacred campfire, and I offer to all of us today, is to remember and recognize that God’s love cannot be contained, not by a camp archway, not by the walls of a church or any other structure. What we experience in loving and safe communities here at church or at camp or in any other number of places is not made possible because of some kind of unique geography, it is our willingness to participate in God’s love. The love, respect and kindness that we experience and “practice” here is needed elsewhere, and we have an opportunity and obligation to try and recreate that experience for everyone we come into contact with. God calls us into the world to do difficult and challenging things, God’s way is not the same as the world’s way. It isn’t easy and it is not a shortcut, we are called to do the hard work, to run the race, to continue the journey and to do it together so that we might bring about God’s kingdom on Earth as it is in Heaven, and for this task “Failure is not an Option”.



