

Heavens are full of wonder

By Tim O'Toole

"Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed." Those words were spoken by Neil Armstrong on July 20, 1969, when men from the planet Earth first set foot on the moon. It was a time of national unity and worldwide excitement, when young and old, rich and poor looked up at the heavens with wonder.

I was a new father that year. While the Vietnam War dragged on, I saw the moon landing as a sign of hope for my infant son and all mankind.

NASA concluded its lunar exploration program with a sixth moon landing in 1972, then limited its manned efforts to the space shuttle and the International Space Station.

Neil Armstrong was an energetic 38 years old in 1969. He left the Earth for a second and final time in 2012, at the age of 82 — just one year after the last space shuttle launch of Atlantis. With Armstrong's passing, our dream of manned space exploration also died.

Armstrong's Apollo 11 moon landing was marvelous in many respects. Beyond its history, it was an event we all got to watch on live TV. Since that time, America has turned its technology to less lofty purposes. Joy sticks no longer control lunar excursion modules. Instead they guide Predator drones on unmanned missions over desolate landscapes in Yemen and Afghanistan.

Post-9/11 America has been transformed into a gated community, with overzealous airport searches, passports required to visit our next-

door neighbors Canada and Mexico and security cameras popping up like mushrooms.

But all is not lost. In June, NASA announced a new class of astronauts destined for asteroid and/or Mars duty. Like Neil Armstrong, the eight men and women selected are all in their 30s. They will join 49 other aviators and scientists in America's revived manned space program, reaching beyond the moon.

Faith & Values is not just about religion. There are other things we treasure as inhabitants of a very large universe. We may wonder how we got here, and debate the age of our planet, but if we continue to pollute the Earth, it may necessitate an Exodus far beyond Moses' experience.

I believe in an open-ended human destiny, where we reach out to explore distant worlds, communicate peacefully with other species that share our universe, and delight in the diversity of life forms we experience.

While astronauts are sent to explore our small corner of the cosmos, we must do what we can to better care for our "big blue marble" (as described by NASA's last Apollo mission in 1972): reducing greenhouse gases; conquering poverty, hunger and disease; developing improved crops; breeding healthier cattle; and tapping into solar energy (and its close cousins — wind, geothermal and tidal power). Maybe in the process we will learn to get along with our neighbor.

Ultimately, we should look at the Earth not as a closed system, but rather as a launching pad for extending our minds and ourselves beyond the "surlly bonds of Earth." Perhaps then we will touch the face of God.

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