

First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA

April 8, 2026



PASTORAL MEDITATION by Reverend Thomas Hawkins

LEAPING OVER THE MOON

Last Wednesday, April 1, Artemis II's crew began its ten-day journey to the moon and back, which is our nation's first manned trip to the moon since 1972. On their loop around the dark side of the moon, they will break the previous record of manned flight's most distant point from the earth. Artemis II is now on its four-day return journey to Earth and will land in the Pacific Ocean on Friday.

Artemis II's journey has captivated the attention of millions of people around the world. Some have been transfixed by the photos of the dark side of the moon. Others have been moved by new images of our small, blue planet floating amid the empty darkness of space. Still others have been touched by the tender moment when Commander Reid Wiseman requested that NASA name a crater on the dark side of the moon for his late wife.

The moon has always fascinated humankind. Created when a planet-sized asteroid crashed into the earth 4.5 billion years ago, the moon has remained an ever-present yet constantly changing object in our skies. It has served as our fundamental marker of days and seasons, rising and setting to a fixed, trackable rhythm of days and seasons that move steadily across the sky.

As early as 40,000 years ago, our human ancestors painted a series of mysterious dots and animal carvings in the Lascaux cave system that scientists believe depict the Pleiades as well as the Orion and Taurus constellations. Some have proposed the dots refer to the 29-day cycle of the moon, although other archeologists dispute this interpretation. The Sumerians of ancient Mesopotamia some 6,000 years ago identified the moon with the goddess Sin who controlled time and seasons and was responsible for the success or failure of the agricultural seasons. The Romans worshipped the moon as the goddess "Luna." She is usually depicted driving a two-horse chariot across the sky. It is from Latin that we derive the word "lunar." Our English-speaking word "moon," on the other hand, comes from Old English *mōna*, which is built from an early Indo-European root for moon or "month" and related to the Germanic and Norse moon god, "Máni."

The peoples of the Bible were as fascinated by the moon and stars as every other ancient people. The books of the bible from Genesis to Revelation mention the moon more than 50 times. Some biblical authors compare the moon's whiteness to virtues like purity and beauty. Others depict the moon in apocalyptic terms, turning to blood or going dark on the day of judgment. (Joel 2:31, Mark 13:24, & Acts 2:20)

Humankind has always looked up at the moon and been moved to wonder and faith. The moon's soft light has a power and majesty, beauty and serenity, as it quietly glides across our skies. Its dependable cycles inspired people's faith in nature's purposes and regularity. Wonder inspires faith; and faith inspires wonder.

Wonder and faith are crucial words for the 17th-century English poet and priest Thomas Traherne. The natural world's wonders engendered in him a deep faith both in the goodness of God and God's creation. This vision of wonder and faith likely stemmed from his years as a student at Oxford in the 1650s when polymaths like Roger Hooke and John Wilkins were promoting the use of telescopes and circulating Hevelius' new map of the moon. Hooke and Wilkins, anticipating our 20th- and 21st-century travels to the moon, even tried to build a machine to go to the moon in the Wadham College garden at Oxford.

Wilkins also published a book entitled "*The Discovery of the World in the Moone*" with details of flying chariots travelling to the moon. Wilkins book was itself probably inspired by a 17th-century work of science fiction written by

Francis Godwin, who later became Bishop of Hereford. In Godwin's "*The Man in the Moone – A Discourse of a Voyage Thither*," a wealthy trader is abandoned on St. Helena Island in the mid-Atlantic. To escape, he builds a device he calls his "Engine" that is pulled by trained geese and uses it to fly to the moon. The merchant's goose-drawn "engine" takes 12 days to reach the moon, nearly triple the time it took Artemis II to reach the moon. But, then, the crew of Artemis II is travelling with something more powerful than goose-power. When he lands, a lunar population of tall Christians welcome him to their utopian society. Later he returns to Earth, landing near the Pacific coast of China where he has further adventures before returning home.

It's quite a futuristic story for being written more than 400 years ago. Right down to landing with its goose-powered chariot in the Pacific Ocean near China. Probably not far from where naval ships will pick up Artemis II's crew. Godwin's adventure story alongside a similar book by the astronomer and mathematician Johann Kepler are considered the earliest English-speaking examples of science fiction.

Given Traherne's professors' interest in lunar exploration, it's little wonder that one of his most famous poems is entitled "On Leaping Over the Moon." In it he muses about being on a walk with his younger brother when they see the reflection of the moon in a puddle blocking their path. His brother jumps over the puddle and excitedly announces that he has just "jumped over the moon."

*Yet doth he briskly run,
And, bold, the danger overcome;
Who, as he leapt, with joy related soon
How happy he o'erleapt the moon.*

Traherne then ponders how the heavenly moon reflected in an earthy puddle teaches a deeper lesson. Heaven is not just "up there" in the sky. Heaven lies around. It is even under our feet that are planted firmly on earth.

*Thus did he yield me in the shady night
A wondrous and instructive light,
Which taught me that under our feet there is,
As o'er our heads, a place of bliss.*

Heavenly bliss is not "pie in the sky after we die," for Traherne. When we see the world with eyes of wonder, illumined by faith, heaven is experienced right here in the present moment. Even in the puddle of water we find ourselves stepping across on our way home from an evening walk.

The risen life is Christ is not just in a heaven beyond death. It is also right now here on earth. For Traherne, we will recognize Resurrection when we reach heaven after this life only if we live Resurrection right now in this life. As Traherne writes in one of his prose meditations, "Your enjoyment of the world is never right till every morning you awake in Heaven.... And look upon the skies, the earth, and the air, as Celestial Joys...You never enjoy the world aright till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens and crowned with the stars..."

Happy Easter Season!
Pastor Thomas

SUNDAY WORSHIP in the sanctuary or livestream link: <http://www.facebook.com/churchontherotary/>

LET'S THANK OUR DEDICATED FIRST RESPONDERS

With your help, you can bake or buy!!!

We would once again like to deliver home baked cookies and/or individually packaged snacks to our always alert, dependable police and fire departments. We realized that your delicious baked goods will stay fresh for a limited amount of time, but packaged snacks will be available for much longer. So why not offer both! If you would like to participate, please drop off your contribution by Sunday the 19th or before 10:00 on April 20th. Please leave in the kitchen. We thank you for supporting this important mission of gratitude.

Thanks for caring. M&O

ALTAR FLOWERS

Would you provide flowers for Sunday service? The following dates are open:

April 19 & 26; May 3, 10, 17 & 31.

To reserve a date please look at the Flower Calendar sign up poster in Bulter Hall or call the church office (525-4121). Thank you! The Flower Committee

PRAYER

God of all infinities: Nurture and grow within us the capacity for wonder and faith. May we experience wonder everywhere in our world, in creatures and things both great and small. Open our eyes to the majesty of your creation and to our deep connectedness to everything within it. May we, through a living faith, see Christ's risen power in the blessedness and glory that surrounds us here in this world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



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