

A VISITED PLANET

Carlos E. Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Genesis 1:1-5; Revelation 22:1-6

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

– John 1:5

Fifty-one years ago tonight — Christmas Eve — three men witnessed a sight no human being had ever before seen. They took a picture of it. A picture that has likely been seen by more human beings than any other. A reproduction of that photo is printed on our bulletin cover this evening.

The three men were American astronauts: Frank Borman, Jim Lovell and Bill Anders, the crew of Apollo 8. They were orbiting the moon, and had already gone round three times. On the fourth pass, they looked up and saw something they hadn't expected to see (they'd been so preoccupied with examining the gray, pockmarked lunar surface below them).

What they saw stunned them. It took their breath away. What they saw was the earth rising.

Frank Borman, commander of the expedition, described it this way:

“I happened to glance out of one of the still-clear windows just at the moment the Earth appeared over the lunar horizon. It was the most beautiful, heart-catching sight of my life, one that sent a torrent of nostalgia, of sheer homesickness, surging through me. It was the only thing in space that had any color to it. Everything

else was either black or white, but not the Earth.”¹

NASA had given the astronauts detailed instructions to photograph the moon, but — amazingly — nowhere in their exhaustive expedition plan was there time set aside to photograph the earth. Incredibly, the higher-ups at NASA hadn't thought much about it. They'd labeled earth photos as “targets of opportunity” and given them the lowest priority in the astronauts' orders. Those expedition planners only had eyes for the moon.

Those three astronauts more than made up for it. They scrambled for a camera, loaded up a roll of color film — yes, they still used film back then — and Bill Anders took the photo that has become so famous.

With that photo in mind, *Saturday Review* magazine editor Norman Cousins later told a Congressional committee: **“What was most significant about the lunar voyage was not that men set foot on the moon, but that they set eye on the earth.”**

Here on Christmas Eve, 2019, I believe we could stand to recover something of that wonder the astronauts felt. In the fifty-one years since the Earthrise photo burst upon the world's consciousness, the image has — sadly —

¹Cited by Robert Poole in *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth* (Yale, 2008), p. 2.

become commonplace. It's lost the luster of wonder it once had. The photo's been reproduced millions of times: on book covers, on posters, on the first Earth Day flag, on postage stamps. We forget how that image of the blue-green marble, suspended in the inky blackness of space, changed everything about the way we understand the earth. Some credit that image with kicking off the modern environmental movement.

More than that, I believe the Earthrise photo revolutionizes the way we conceive of Christmas. If there's such a thing as a God's-eye view of the earth, then this is it. Did God gaze upon that tiny, blue-green sphere and say, "There, that's where I'm going!"? Did that spark of divine life zoom through the cold darkness of space, aimed straight as an arrow for a tiny, insignificant Galilean village, and the frightened teenager who had just answered the angel with the words, "Let it be with me according to your word"?

What business could God — creator of a universe measured in light-years — possibly have with such an insignificant rock, and its flawed and self-satisfied tribes of human inhabitants?

Bible translator J.B. Phillips had an understanding of how improbably wondrous this divine visitation is. Five years before the famous photo was snapped from the space capsule, he wrote:

“Behind all our fun and games at Christmas time, we should not try to escape a sense of awe, almost a sense of fright, at what God has done. We must never allow anything to blind us to the true significance of what happened at Bethlehem so long ago. Nothing can alter the fact that we live on a visited planet.”²

The one who visited, of course, was God.

Tonight we’ve heard those beloved words from the second chapter of Luke: about shepherds out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night... the abrupt appearance of an angel of the Lord, with glory shining all around... and the tender scene of two frightened parents, gazing down in wonder at their newborn, slumbering on the soft straw of a feeding-trough: the child the angel told them is none other than the son of God.

Mary and Joseph knew nothing of the image of the earth as seen from space — Bethlehem was likely the farthest they’d ever traveled from home — but somehow even they had a sense of the immensity of what had just happened.

The second reading we heard this night — the famous prologue to the Gospel of John — seems to display a cosmic perspective:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the

²J.B. Phillips, *Good News: Thoughts on God and Man* (MacMillan, 1963), 163.

darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Those three Apollo astronauts told of how wondrous a sight it was to behold the earth suspended in the terrifying blackness of space. It looked, to them, like light shining in the darkness — although in truth, the light emanating from the planet was reflected sunlight.

After he'd returned to earth, astronaut Jim Lovell said:

“Up there, it’s a black-and-white world. There’s no color. In the whole universe, wherever we looked, the only bit of color was back on Earth.... It was the most beautiful thing there was to see in all the heavens. People down here don’t realize what they have.”³

There are many reasons to fear, tonight, that you and I — and the whole human race — are living in darkness. So many terrifying problems beset this benighted world: poverty, warfare, hatred, greed, environmental destruction. On the individual level, all too many of us live with the vague dread of darkness closing in, struggling with the soul-sickness called depression. I’m certain there are some here this night for whom those words are all too true.

We all do well, at Christmas-time or at any other, to heed those words of John — perhaps with the image of that visited planet in our minds: **“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”**

³*Earthrise*, p. 2.

Perhaps the most elegant commentary on the Apollo 8 spaceflight came from the poet Archibald MacLeish, in an essay called “Riders on the Earth.” It was published in the *New York Times* on Christmas Day, 1968: just one day after Bill Anders had taken his famous photo. As the newspaper went to press, the photographic film with the Earthrise on it was still orbiting the moon. How did MacLeish have the imagination to know how profound the impact of that sight would prove to be? Maybe it was because he was a poet.

Let me read you the opening paragraphs of that short essay. More eloquent words have seldom been written:

“Men’s conception of themselves and of each other has always depended on their notion of the earth. When the earth was the World — all the world there was — and the stars were lights in Dante’s heaven, and the ground beneath men’s feet roofed Hell, they saw themselves as creatures at the center of the universe, the sole, particular concern of God — and from that high place they ruled and killed and conquered as they pleased.

And when, centuries later, the earth was no longer the World but a small, wet spinning planet in the solar system of a minor star off at the edge of an inconsiderable galaxy in the immeasurable distances of space — when Dante’s heaven had disappeared and there was no Hell (at least no Hell beneath the feet) — men began to see themselves not as God-directed actors at the center of a noble drama, but as helpless victims of a senseless farce where all the rest were helpless victims also and millions could be killed in

world-wide wars or in blasted cities or in concentration camps without a thought or reason but the reason — if we call it one — of force.

Now, in the last few hours, the notion may have changed again. For the first time in all of time men have seen it not as continents or oceans from the little distance of a hundred miles or two or three, but seen it from the depth of space; seen it whole and round and beautiful and small....”

MacLeish concludes his essay with these words:

“To see the earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together, brothers on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold — brothers who know now they are truly brothers.”⁴

That very same day — Christmas Eve, 1968 — astronaut Frank Borman broadcast a message back from his moon orbit to the people of the world. He’d had a few weeks to think about what to say — ever since one of the higher-ups at NASA had informed him he and his comrades would be orbiting the moon on Christmas Eve. **“We figure more people will be listening to your voice than that of any man in history,”** his boss had helpfully pointed out. **“So we want you to say something appropriate.”**

⁴<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/national/science/nasa/122568sci-nasa-macleish.html>

Incredibly, NASA didn't provide Borman with any talking points. They left it entirely up to him – native of Gary, Indiana, test pilot and Colonel in the U.S. Air Force.

What Borman decided to do was to read the first 10 verses from Genesis, chapter 1, in the King James Version:

**“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the
face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the
waters.
And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.
And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from
the darkness.”**

He concluded his reading by saying simply, **“And from the crew of Apollo 8, we close with good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas, and God bless all of you — all of you on the good Earth.”**

Fifty-one years after we first gazed upon this spinning planet as God must see it, how has that viewpoint changed our way of looking at the world, and our responsibility to care for it? Have we truly lived up to the vision of the poet, who dared hope that we human beings of every race and clan may **“see ourselves as riders on the earth together”**?

By all accounts, we've still got a long way to go. Progress has been made on many fronts, but the angel's promise of “peace on earth, good will to all” is still

the most fragile of dreams. The human heart is just as fickle and self-seeking as ever it was.

And yet.... and yet, we do live on a visited planet. Our Creator does not abandon us, but comes to dwell among us in the person of Jesus Christ. “The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory” — not just the glory of sunlight reflected off a planet hanging in the black immensity of space — but “glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

That, my friends, is the glory of Christmas. May you, and all whom you love, come to know something of that glory: this Christmas Eve, yes, but also through all your days!

Let us pray:

**O God, we thank you for this earth, our island home;
for the broad sky and the star-flecked heavens,
for ocean and streams,
for towering mountains and whispering wind,
for sheltering trees and verdant grass.**

**We are awed when we consider
how you have come to dwell among us
in the person of Jesus:
how you have blessed this planet with your presence.**

**And so, this night, we ask that you would inspire every heart
to prepare him room
and heaven and nature sing!
Amen.**

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