

September 1, 2019
Colossians 1: 15-28
“Earthrise”
Rev. Lou Nyiri

July 20, 1969 – astronaut Neil Armstrong climbed down the ladder of the Apollo 11 lunar lander and set foot on the surface of the moon.

As he planted feet on the gravity free surface of the moon, he uttered those iconic words, “That’s one small step [...leave space for congregation fill in the rest of the saying...] for man, one giant leap for mankind.”

Does anyone here know what his original intent was to say?

He had thought he would say, “one small step for *a* man,” what came out was “one small step for man.”

While some may call it semantics – it is so much more. While the words were literally true – it was a short step or drop from the bottom rung of the ladder to the lunar surface – the gravity of the words were life-changing for the implications of this moment for humanity were enormous.

The step did not occur without some hesitant anxiety on Armstrong’s part. Before the historic flight of Apollo 11, his brother Dean asked him, “What single thing do you have the most uncertainty about?”

To which, Armstrong replied, “How deep is the dust?”

Everyone connected to the Apollo 11 mission had the same worry, especially Armstrong, who would be the man taking this step out onto the Sea of Tranquility. They knew the moon was covered in a powdery gray dust, what they didn’t know for sure was how deep it was. When the Apollo lander touched down without sinking in, everyone at Mission Control breathed a sigh of relief – no one more than Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin – for their lives depended on the depth of that dust.

At the time, that lunar landing was the largest TV audience ever, 530 million people held their breath along with Mission Control as they observed that “small step.” Those alive to watch it knew history was being made. (*Show of hands, who saw it live?*)

Humanity had expanded, however briefly, to another world. The flag planted by Armstrong and Aldrin – shrewdly fashioned to give the illusion of flying in an aspirational lunar breeze – symbolically claimed the moon for the United States. In truth, the achievement was grander in scope for it was bigger than any one nation’s – this moment belonged to the human race.

And, humanity's perspective was changing!

As Armstrong and Aldrin looked up from their science experiments, they saw something new against the blackness of that lunar sky: the blue-green surface of a tiny earth.

It wasn't the first-time astronauts had seen earth from space – that perspective had been shared by the Apollo 8 on Christmas Eve 1968 - Frank Borman, Jim Lovell and Bill Anders as they were orbiting the moon. They had already gone around three times and on the fourth pass they looked up and saw something they hadn't expected to see as they intently studied and examined the cratered lunar surface below. What they saw not only surprised them, it took their breath away – they saw the Earth rising.

Expedition commander, Frank Borman, 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 sights 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."

Jim Lovell, described what was so arresting about the Earthrise, "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."

The Apollo 8 astronauts had detailed instructions to photograph the moon. Nowhere in their exhaustive plan was time set aside to photograph the Earth – NASA authorities hadn't thought much about that aspect of the "trip" – photographs of Earth were listed as "targets of opportunity" and given lowest priority in the astronauts' orders. The planners only had eyes for the moon.

That said, as Apollo 8 rounded the moon for the fourth time, the astronauts scrambled for a camera loaded with color film. Bill Anders took the now famous photograph known as Earthrise.

The three were out of radio contact with Earth at the time, but the cockpit voice recorder preserved their conversation. They sound like a trio of tourists – and in a sense, that is what they were:

[9:30 – Contemporary Worship]

Here's the conversation among Borman, Anders and Lovell – play audio clip over earthrise photo...

[8:15 and 11:00 – Traditional Worship]

"Oh, my God," says Borman, "look at that picture over there! Here's the Earth comin' up. Wow, that is pretty!"

“Hey, don’t take that,” says Anders, “it’s not scheduled.”

Borman just laughs. “you got a color film, Jim?”

Anders has a change of heart. “Hand me that roll of color quick, will you?”

“Oh, man, that’s great,” marvels Lovell, looking out the window.

“Hurry, quick,” says Anders.

“Take several of them! Here, give it to me,” says Lovell.

“Calm down, Lovell,” says Commander Borman, amusement in his voice.

[9:30 – Contemporary Worship – pick up here]

The first Earthrise ever witnessed by human beings was so grand – it turned highly trained, disciplined military officers into a gaggle of awestruck kids. This vision of the Earth would prove more memorable than those moon photos they took.

Saturday Review editor Norman Cousins when speaking to a Congressional committee, quipped, “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.”

French novelist, Marcel Proust captured this concept when he wrote in his journal, “The real voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.”

Just one day after this now famous photo had been taken, the poet Archibald MacLeish, published an essay called “Riders on the Earth” on Christmas Day 1968 in *The New York Times* – keep in mind that as the paper went to press the photo of Earthrise was still on board Apollo 8 – and yet MacLeish captured the profound impact of this lunar orbit and composed the following eloquent words,

“[Humanity’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 [our] 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 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) – [humanity] 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.*** (***emphasis mine***)

MacLeish concludes his essay, “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, [siblings] on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold – [siblings] who know now they are truly brothers [and sisters].”

MacLeish’s words are now – some fifty years later – a vision we are still struggling to realize.

The Apollo space program’s “one giant leap” provided the human race with a massive change of perspective: the view back from the moon of the Earth floating in space.

Our Colossians passage provided a change of theological perspective...

Colossians 1:15-28 speaks of Jesus Christ as “...the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together” (vv. 15-17).

To Christians, those are familiar words. They express what the church has always believed about Jesus. We overlook the impact those words had at the time they were written. To the pagan world, they upended everything.

“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”

The natural response would have been, *Really? Fullness of God? Dwelling inside the skin of a Judean peasant?*

Philosophically – it was a giant leap – like the moon landing – it was an arresting change in perspective based upon a real human experience.

The first to experience it – Mary Magdalene – who through tearful eyes at the resurrection supposed him to be the gardener – and then others saw the risen Lord too!

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15:5-7, “He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.”

Television allowed millions to watch the first moon landing in real time – and it changed their perspective.

Imagine if TV covered the resurrection – what a changed vision it would evoke.

Alas, no TV back in Jesus' day – so, it falls to us – those who profess Christ as Lord and Savior – those commissioned to be Jesus' witnesses – the people called by his name to share what we have heard and seen of him.

Unlike that image of the colorful planet Earth floating in the deep darkness of space – which exists only on photographic film – the image of Christ in this world is re-created by means of sanctified imagination.

We are, as Archibald MacLeish wrote in 1968, “riders on the Earth together...siblings who know now [we] are truly brothers [and sisters].”

When our minds begin to grasp the new perspective – the new way of living and being which comes from Jesus' resurrection – we make a great leap to living that new life out in this world.

In the words of St. Teresa of Avila:

Christ has no body now but yours.

No hands, no feet on earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which He looks compassion on this world.

Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good.

Yours are the hands with which He blesses all the world.

Yours are the hand, yours are the feet.

Yours are the eyes, you are His body.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

What small steps will we take to live into this reality? – For small steps can lead to giant leaps...

Alleluia & Amen.

9:30 – Contemporary Worship – Introduction to Video after Announcements:

On the Apollo 8 mission, the crew was tasked to snap photos of the lunar surface in preparation for the Apollo 11 moon landing. The crew would be orbiting the Earth during Christmas 1968. Expedition Commander, Frank Borman, was tasked with broadcasting a Christmas Eve greeting back to the Earth. NASA officials gave him the following guidance, “We figure more people will be listening to your voice than that of any man in history...So, we want you to say something appropriate.”

Borman decided to simply read the first 10 verses from Genesis, chapter 1, out of the authorized King James Version. He began and then crewmates Jim Lovell and Bill Anders took turns with the reading as well. Here is how it looked and sounded from their vantage point about Apollo 8...[play video]

“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.”