

Christmas Eve 2018 10:30 pm

Astronauts and Angels

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

Perhaps they were unlikely to be thought of as angels, but 50 years ago tonight, on Christmas Eve, three men, three human beings who happened to be 240,000 miles from the planet earth orbiting around the moon just 50 miles from its surface, delivered the message of peace everyone on earth needed to hear; not unlike the angels in tonight's Christmas Gospel.

There have been quite a few news reports and special ceremonies commemorating the 50th Anniversary of Apollo 8, the first manned space flight to the moon, including one at the National Cathedral in Washington DC earlier this month. All of these reports and events have remembered the highlights of the mission that was a surprise in many ways. The mission itself was a surprise, when NASA officials boldly changed the mission objective to go to the moon in late December of 1968, orbit the moon 10 times, take photographs and make maps of the lunar surface to better plan future missions that would land on the moon, and then return to the earth – an important objective for every lunar mission.

Apollo 8 launched on December 21, and inserted into lunar orbit 3 days later, on Christmas Eve. Astronauts Frank Borman, Jim Lovell, and Bill Anders often speak about that Christmas Eve, how they flew around the moon and for the first time came to what is called “the dark side of the moon” – that is the side we never see from earth – and they gazed on a rather desolate landscape made of rock and thick lunar dust pockmarked with craters created by meteorites impacting on the surface of the moon. It was another world: gray, devoid of life, foreboding, and far from home. In their excitement of being the first people to see another world with their own eyes instead of looking at images captured by satellites and probes, they were caught off guard by what happened next. When they looked up from that gray and lifeless lunar surface and saw the earth emerge from behind the moon. What is called earth rise. Bill Anders was quick to take a picture of that earth rise, capturing a now famous image so that all of us can look at it and see what they saw.

They looked up and saw the earth from a whole new perspective. It was beautiful. And bright. And as full of color with deep and rich blues and greens and the bright white of clouds as the moon was completely lacking in color. And it looked so small. Jim Lovell often said that from his vantage point in the lunar module, he could cover the earth by holding up his thumb in front of it. To him that was a powerful moment to realize everyone and everything and every place he had ever

known was small enough to fit behind his own thumb and this revelation made him realize how very huge the universe is and how very small the earth and even smaller he is, which made him wonder about his place in this immense universe. Others say it also exposed how vulnerable and fragile the earth is.

Our Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry has said this image of the earth from the moon forever changed our perspective of how we see the earth and our place on it. Apollo 8 gave the new perspective of seeing humanity as being part of a whole rather than being the sum total of the whole. Seeing that earth rise was so powerful, Bill Anders summed it up by saying, “We came all this way to explore the moon, and the most important thing we discovered was the earth.”

Frank Borman, Jim Lovell, and Bill Anders did not keep this powerful moment to themselves. They shared it with the world. As part of their mission, the astronauts transmitted a television broadcast back to the earth 50 years ago tonight – at about this exact time. It lasted 3 minutes and was the most viewed program to date. Each astronaut took a turn describing the surface of the moon while a television camera showed live images of what the astronauts were seeing. Then the camera angle changed and showed the millions of people watching on their television sets the earth as the astronauts saw it from the moon. Then the astronauts said they had a special message for everyone back on the earth, and they took turns reading from the first chapter of the book Genesis; the story of when God created the earth and pronounced everything God created: the light, the dark, the stars and moon and sun, the plants and animals, the waters and the earth, and the people, God pronounced it all Good.

It was such a powerful message, one so needed, that NASA administrators said as the engineers in the control room – most of whom were not religious- listened to that message, there was not a dry eye in the room as they all wept.

That message was needed because in December of 1968 there did not seem to be much about life on the earth anyone would have been likely to call ‘good’. For those who don’t remember, it had been a year marked with violence, tragedy, loss, division, and so much anger. In January the Tet Offensive proved the war in Vietnam was far from nearing its end and that war itself was not what the government had said it was, which produced anti-war protests in cities and college and university campuses that often turned violent. In April Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated sparking riots all over the country. In June Robert Kennedy was murdered and there seemed to be no end to the violence. By Christmas time, it seems it was hard for most people to see anything beautiful or peaceful or good about life on earth in 1968.

Then three angels, three messengers, orbiting the moon reminded everyone back on earth of the importance of stepping back and looking up, of seeing the whole picture, as there is more to any situation than we can see at any given moment in time. Those astronauts gave the people on earth the Christmas gift of a new perspective; of seeing there was more to the earth than the violence and anger and division that made up the nightly news. There is beauty. There is connection: to each other, to the planet that is our home, and to God the Creator who made the earth and everything and everyone on it for good. All on the night we celebrate when the Creator became part of creation.

Michael Curry mused that maybe God responded to that gift the astronauts gave the people of the earth in that television broadcast with a cosmic smile – I love the image of God smiling cosmically – and said, “Now y’all get to see what I see.” God sees it all; the trauma, the beauty, the good, the vulnerability, the mistakes, the messiness, the disease, the brokenness, the fear, the loneliness, the possibilities, the connections, and God loves us all regardless. Which is getting close to what we are celebrating tonight: The Mystery of the Incarnation, God becoming flesh, Mary’s baby whose first bed was a manger because there was no room for them in the inn, and the message of peace the angels proclaimed because of that baby’s birth. That baby who came to show us what God is and who God is and to restore all people to a good relationship with God, each other and our home. You see, times were tough when Jesus was born: people were oppressed by governments, by religion, by poverty. There were insurrections and riots and wars and violence in those days too. But Jesus was not born just because things were bad. God became Incarnate, became flesh in the midst of all that stuff, in our vulnerabilities and fears and hopes and dreams to restore us to God and the goodness God made us to be and can still see in us.

God who sees the whole earth, the whole of humanity, and loves us so much, God came to be with us in every way: walk with us, celebrate with us, suffer with us, share life and death with us, as one of us, because God wants us to remember and connect with the goodness that is in us, and to live into that goodness because that is God’s love. God loves us enough to live as one of us, die as one of us, and in so doing open a way for a deeper relationship with God that none of the tragedies, violence, messiness, brokenness, trauma, not even death itself, will ever be able to keep us from God or God from us: that love of God is the ultimate Good.

To help people see that the baby born in Bethlehem was the embodiment of God’s love present with them, angels were sent and delivered a message to the shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem, which we heard in tonight’s Gospel. The

message that started with looking up to see the angels, to see the glory of God, to hear the message of love and peace and hope, so that the shepherds could look back down and see God's love among them. And then, they could see it was good.

That is the very same thing the three Apollo 8 astronauts did for the earth 50 years ago tonight: they invited people to look up so that when they looked back down, they could see the good that was with them through every day and every moment of that year. I do not know how you are feeling 50 years after Apollo 8, if you are feeling disheartened, hopeful, happy, fearful, or worried. No matter how we are feeling, as we once again celebrate Jesus' birth, perhaps we too could appreciate the reminder to look up, to look up to see the whole picture, the goodness of God's love in the wonders of the universe, in the wonders of creation, creation God loves so much God embraces, and God came part of what God had made so that we all can know better the goodness of God's Love and then love one another and this earth better, because we can see the good in it all.

Perhaps the best way to conclude this sermon on this Christmas Eve is with the words of an astronaut who gave the message of an angel: "Merry Christmas, and God bless all of you, all of you on the Good Earth."