

**A sermon preached by the Rev. Jeanne Leinbach
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio
on December 24, 2018**

Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

Fifty years ago tonight, a message was heard around the world, transmitted from Apollo 8 circling the moon. Astronauts William Anders, Frank Borman, and James Lovell Jr. recited the first verses from the Book of Genesis, the story of our creation. God created the heaven and the earth. God shaped the light and the darkness, the dry land and the seas. The astronauts concluded with these words: "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."

Earlier this month, celebrating this 50th anniversary, a panel at the National Cathedral explored the spiritual dimension of Apollo 8's mission. The panel included Astronaut James Lovell, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, the Rev. Randy Hollerith, Dean of the National Cathedral, and Ellen Stofan, former chief scientist of NASA. Stofan reminded us, she said, "Some of our bravest pilots, riding atop repurposed weapons of war, delivered a message of peace for all humankind. That was the spirit of Apollo 8." It was 1968 - this Christmas message came at the end of a year marked by civil unrest: the Vietnam War waged on, civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in April, and Presidential candidate Robert Kennedy was assassinated in June. Stofan continued, she said, "Hearing the story of creation beaming down on Christmas Eve, even the steely-eyed flight directors in Mission Control...wept."

The Apollo 8 mission was the first time humans left Earth's orbit and travelled to the moon 250,000 miles away. The astronauts were the first people to see the far side of the moon and the first to see the Earth rise over the lunar horizon. Randy Hollerith, from the National Cathedral, "suggested that Apollo 8 was a holy journey not only for what it accomplished, but for

what it revealed to us about our place in God's grand creation." We are each a singular part of a multitudinous creation. Astronaut William Anders once described that moment of coming around from the back side of the moon and seeing Earth. Some of you might recall that iconic photo he took: a sliver of the moon at the bottom of the frame and the Earth in the distance. Anders said, "We came all this way to explore the Moon and the most important thing...is that we discovered the Earth." Presiding Bishop Michael Curry offered his thoughts on Apollo 8. He commented, "I wonder if God said, 'Now y'all see what I see.'" He added, "Some believe that moment changed human consciousness forever (*Episcopal News Service*, December 12, 2018)."

Imagine the awe of looking at the Earth from the moon. Imagine. The continents and the seas. The mountains and the valleys. The forests and the deserts. The farms and the cities. The houses and ware houses and office buildings. The schools and libraries, the grocery stores and gas stations, the restaurants and shops, the churches and hospitals and community centers, the city halls and power plants and fire stations, the police stations and court houses and prisons, the theatres and museums and sports arenas, the planes and trains and busses and boats and trucks and cars and bicycles...the populated and the desolate, the war and the peace, the oppressed and the free, the sick and the healthy, the sadness and the joy, the people. The people of every nationality and race and religion. "God bless all of you, all of you on the good Earth." Imagine looking at the Earth from the moon. The awe. The wonder. The immensity of global concerns. The vastness of individual concerns. Imagine the Love...that holds it all.

This is the Love that could not be contained, that overflowed and infused our reality. This is the Love that envelops us. This is the Love that wants to be known, to calm and to assure and to inspire. Jesus came into this world so we would know. We are never alone. Even in the dark corners. Even in the shadows of loneliness and sadness. We are loved. Jesus came into this

world so we would know. God's love is meant to overflow from our individual self to care for one another, near and far. Barbara Cawthorne Crafton, an Episcopal priest and noted author, writes that through Jesus Christ, God is not giving us "an exemption from the realities of human history, but a loving understanding of what we're going through (*Let Every Heart Prepare*, p. 9). Jesus lived among us. We are known and understood. We are held and guided and inspired on this journey. Jesus Christ is God's Love.

"God bless all of you, all of you on the good Earth." The awe with which we gaze on the Earth from the moon is the requisite awe for the limitlessness of God's love, love that overflowed and infused our reality, love for all on the good Earth. For all (*5 Good News Stories from Around the World*, www.pbs.org, August, September, October 2018): "In India, two U.N. agencies have joined forces with local organizations to start girls' clubs in some of the country's most remote areas. The members of one such club in a southern village in Tamil Nadu have started a 150-book library, and successfully spurred local authorities to build a bus stop so the girls' and boys' route to school is safer." "In the United Kingdom, the *Clink Charity* trains prisoners in food preparation and serves the food cooked by the inmates at its restaurants. The charity's mission is to reduce the reoffending rates after people are released." "In Kampala, Uganda, *Bicycles Against Poverty* provides bicycles on a lease-to-own basis in rural African communities to make residents more mobile for jobs, health care and general quality of life." "In Berkeley, California, *AnnieCannons*, named after a female astronaut, is part coding camp and part job agency. This organization equips sex trafficking survivors with computer coding skills to help them earn a living in the technology industry." "In Iran's capital Tehran, at the *Downtism Café*, all of the workers have Down syndrome or autism and serve a steady stream of customers seeking coffee and cakes. Not only does the café offer jobs to these community members who are underemployed, it also offers them

greater visibility in society.”

The Earth now holds more than 7 billion people. Each one of us is loved in our individuality, and we have been shown how to share God’s love with one another. Jesus being born into this world changed human consciousness forever. The astronauts’ view from Apollo 8, coming around from the back side of the moon and gazing down on Earth, changed human consciousness forever. May our hearts remain open to the awe and the wonder. The Love that holds it all came into this world. Let our hearts bow - let our voices sing - let us love.