

Epiphany 5B
Peace, Seattle
February 4, 2018
Isaiah 40:21-31, Mark 1:29-39

SEARCHING FOR GOD

It's arguably the most iconic photograph of the 20th century: the Earth rising above the Moon's bleached and desolate horizon, a breathtaking jewel of color and life 238,000 miles away.¹

It was captured in December of 1968 as Apollo 8 astronauts Frank Borman, Jim Lovell and Bill Anders returned from humanity's first voyage around the Moon. This picture of our Blue Marble planet hanging above the grey lunar landscape against the dark background of space came to be called EARTHRISE.

Astronaut Bill Anders, who took the photo, called it "the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen." Recalling the sight years later he said, "It occurred to me that, here we are, all the way up there at the Moon, and we're studying this thing and it's really the Earth as seen from the Moon that's the most interesting aspect of this flight."²

LIFT UP YOUR EYES ON HIGH AND SEE: WHO CREATED THESE?
THE ONE WHO BRINGS OUT THEIR HOST AND NUMBERS THEM,
CALLING THEM ALL BY NAME;
...THE LORD IS THE EVERLASTING GOD, THE CREATOR OF THE ENDS OF THE EARTH.

Four years after Apollo 8 returned home, Charlie Duke was an astronaut on the Apollo 16 mission and joined that most elite group of people on the planet: Those who'd seen the Earth rise above the Moon's bleak horizon. And he did them one better—he spent 3 days walking on the moon.

Charlie had become an astronaut the old fashioned way—by working first as a test pilot, and then on the ground crew for the other Apollo flights, until finally his number came up and he was selected to go into space on Apollo 16.

For many astronauts, gazing at the Earth from space was a mystical experience. But not for Charlie Duke. As he watched this Blue Marble globe floating in the blackness of space, Charlie experienced no special connection to God.

When they returned to Earth, Duke and the rest of the crew, were celebrated as heroes. They'd landed on the moon and come back to tell about it. Duke and the crew had reached a milestone that only a handful of people in all history had attained, and it was exhilarating.

Yet soon after returning home from his once-in-a-lifetime experience, the exhilaration turned to deep despair. "Now what?" Duke would think to himself. "What are you going to do with the rest of your life?"

The problems he'd left behind when he rocketed into space were there to greet him when he returned.³ His relationship with his wife, Dottie, was growing more and more distant. His all-consuming vocation had taken a toll on their marriage. Dottie told Charlie how depressed she was, even to the point of feeling suicidal, and Charlie had no adequate way to respond. "I could fix the dishwasher," he later said, "but I had no way of dealing with what she was telling me." Separation and divorce seemed imminent.

¹ This opening paragraph is excerpted from Andrew Chaikin, *Houston, We Have a Photo*. *Smithsonian*, January/February, 2018. p. 112. Chaikin's research into the question of which astronaut took the Earthrise photo established unequivocally that it was Bill Anders, not Frank Borman.

² Ibid, p. 114.

³ Details of the Duke's life story are gleaned from what they shared in this recording. https://archive.org/details/LifeStoryFoundationCharlie_DottieDukeLifeStory

Desperate for a solution, Dottie attended a weekend workshop at the church they attended, where for the first time she heard others speak about the difference that a daily walk with Christ had made in their lives. Though she'd always been a churchgoer and had regularly taught Sunday School, Dottie realized that she didn't really believe that God could or would make a difference in her life.

After the retreat, Dottie thought, "I've tried everything but Jesus." She wondered: could Christ's presence in her life make a difference for her, make a difference for them? She decided she would find out.

Slowly, day by day, her prayer life grew. She began going to God with simple prayers and began experiencing answers to prayers when she'd never gotten answers before. Her faith began to deepen and grow, until, finally, she understood in the core of her being that a fresh start—a forgiven life, was not only possible—it was the gift God was offering her; that Jesus' love was real.

Then one day in her ongoing conversation with God, she says God told her that just as God had given her the gift of forgiveness, she was to give that same gift to Charlie. Her initial response was NO WAY! I've got a long list, she told God, of the ways he's hurt me and failed me—I don't want to forgive him, I want him to suffer for a while.

But God kept working with Dottie, until finally she agreed. She agreed she would forgive Charlie, but had no idea how to do it—she recognized no capacity within herself to make that happen.

Gradually, over a period of months, God made a way where there was no way. Dottie felt God taking away all the hurt and pain, and she felt new love and possibility for her marriage where before there was none.

And Charlie noticed. And after seeing his wife begin to change before his eyes, Charlie began to join her. God seemed to be calling them into new territory, and now he, too, was responding to God's invitation.

So together they went on a quest for Christ.

- They cultivated a habit of praying together at home.
- They committed themselves to bringing Jesus front and center in their marriage.
- And slowly, things began to turn around.

While Charlie and Dottie were searching for answers, searching for a way forward, for renewed meaning in their marriage, searching for a way to live, God was searching too—searching for them. And God found them.

"I've walked on the moon," says Charlie, "but walking with God is a lot more exciting."
"It cost the government 400 million dollars for me to walk three days on the moon and it's over. But walking with Jesus is free—and it's forever...God is real, and God is powerful, and God can change and heal and restore and deliver."

Charlie Duke has walked on the moon, seen Earth from the moon. But the most transformative event in his life have come through his and his wife Dottie's journey with Jesus.

How do we search for God? And what do we expect to find?

If we learn one thing about Jesus from Mark's gospel, it's that Jesus has the power to heal. In one episode after another Mark shows us how Jesus touches people where they are most vulnerable, and makes their broken lives whole again.

Refusing to accept the dead end position assigned to them by the culture of the day, Jesus takes them by the hand—as he took Peter's mother in law by the hand in today's gospel story—lifts them up, and reconnects them to community.

That Sabbath evening in Capernaum, Mark says, the whole city gathered around the home, and Jesus spent half the night curing diseases, and casting out demons—signs that God's reign was among them right then and there.

The next morning, in the predawn darkness Jesus gets up and walks out of town under the moon and stars to find a place of solitude where he can pray.

When they awake and discover he's gone, and that a crowd is gathering again outside, Simon and the others go hunting for Jesus.

LORD, they tell him when they find him, EVERYONE IS SEARCHING FOR YOU!
And isn't this the fundamental human cry? **GOD, EVERYONE IS SEARCHING FOR YOU!**

Robert Greenleaf⁴ writes about twelve theologians of all faiths and twelve psychiatrists of all faiths who had come together for an off-the-record seminar. The theme was HEALING.

The chair of the conference, a psychiatrist, opened the seminar with an observation: We are all healers, whether we are ministers or doctors, he said. Why are we in this business? What is our motivation?

It took a mere 10 minutes for them to all agree: We're in this business for our own healing.

At some level, we are all engaged in this same search for wholeness.
And the good news is: while we're out searching for God, God in Christ is searching for us.

All of us want, all of us need, some measure of healing. The good news is, that the wholeness Jesus brought to the lives of those he touched in Capernaum, is available to us too.

The God who "stretched the spangled heavens" has come among us in Jesus, and come among us for good.

Let us pray.

Gracious Lord, from the vast scale of space to the intimate personal spaces of our family relationships, you are working to bring new life from what would otherwise be dead ends.

You are the one who makes us whole; you are the one who teaches us forgiveness; you are the one who lifts us to fullness of life. Increase our faith, deepen our trust in your ability to transform our lives in powerfully personal ways. Help us to recognize your hand as you reach out to us and help us to grab hold, and so be caught in your embrace. In your name we pray. Amen.

⁴ Guide to Prayer, p. 79.