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Christmas Eve C
Peace, Seattle
December 24, 2018
Luke 2:1-20

# EARTHRISE TO INCARNATE CHRIST

**On a six-day mission that launched 50 years ago last week—a voyage considered to be NASA's boldest and riskiest ever—Apollo 8 astronauts Frank Borman, Jim Lovell & Bill Anders became the first human beings to orbit the Moon and safely return.**

They had circled the moon a few times already, scouting the surface for future Apollo landing sites, when on Christmas Eve 1968, as they completed another orbit, commander Borman rolled the spacecraft, and suddenly there it was: **a blue marble Earth rising above the Moon's desolate gray, "a breathtaking jewel of color and life 238,000 miles away**."[1]

"Look at that picture over there!" exclaimed Anders. "There's the Earth coming up. Wow, is that pretty!"

Anders, the mission photographer, knew black and white film wouldn't do it justice.
But he also knew he didn't have a lot of time if he was going to get the shot.

HAND ME A ROLL OF COLOR [FILM] QUICK, he said. His crewmate obliged, and the image he took, transmitted from space, went on to capture the imagination of the entire world: **EARTHRISE.** [2]

Later that day as they sped toward home, in what was at the time the most watched television broadcast ever, the three crew members took turns reading the opening 10 verses from Genesis:[3]

> In the beginning God created the heavens 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...

Reflecting on his experience later on, Anders called the surprising sight of blue marble Earth rising above the lifeless lunar landscape, "the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen." [4]

> "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."[5]

**Our home planet—so beautiful, and yet so very fragile, small and finite.**

**The first Christmas Eve, too, was a night of surprises. First and foremost among them the stunning surprise that in this world that continually worships power, success, and prestige, God made his appearance as a baby: defenseless, dependent, vulnerable.**

> THIS WILL BE A SIGN FOR YOU, said the angel to the shepherds.
> YOU WILL FIND A BABE WRAPPED IN BANDS OF CLOTH AND LYING IN A MANGER.

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[1] See 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. Also Dennis Overbye, *The New York Times*, 12/21/2018 https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/21/science/earthrise-moon-apollo-nasa.html and *The Washington Post*, 12-24-2018.
[2] Dennis Overbye, *The New York Times*, 12/21/2018 https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/21/science/earthrise-moon-apollo-nasa.html
[3] Anders read verses 1–4, Lovell read verses 5–8, and Borman read verses 9–10, concluding the transmission. Woods, David; O'Brien, Frank (December 27, 2008). *"Day 4: Lunar Orbits 7, 8 and 9"*. The Apollo 8 Flight Journal. NASA History Division. *Retrieved May 4, 2015. (Flight time 086:06:40 to 086:08:39)*
[4] *The Houston Chronicle*, 12-24-2018 https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/local/article/Fifty-years-ago-Apollo-8-sent-a-lunar-Christmas-13485556.php
[5] Ibid, p. 114.

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**St. John put it most simply and profoundly:**
THE LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS, AND THE DARKNESS HAS NOT OVER COME IT

**That's what tonight is about friends—that's why we're here! The Word has become flesh and pitched his tent among us. God has risked everything in order to make love real for you and for me.**

Our infinite Creator could, I suppose, have gazed at us from a distance...but God saw that a closer relationship was needed; a leap was necessary, one that would bring him within range; that would move from an Earthrise perspective into the fragile, small and finite confines of Mary's womb.

"God's first [impulse]," writes Richard Rohr, "was to become manifest—to pour out divine, infinite love into finite, visible forms...[and] in Jesus, this eternal omnipresence [has] a precise, concrete, and personal referent... The formless took on form in someone we could "hear, see, and touch."[6]

**God took all that he wanted us to know about him and funneled it into a baby.**

This night celebrates the meaning of God-with-us: the pain and pleasure, the agony and ecstasy, the oneness with Earth in dying and rising to new life. It's all here in miniature at the manger.

Like a trapeze artist working without a net, God let's go of the infinite and takes the plunge into the world of matter—into flesh, bone and blood—and banishes forever any notion we may carry that he is apart from us, distant, uncaring, aloof.

With his birth at Bethlehem, everything becomes as clear as the great STAR that shone in the sky that night, revealing to us in ways we could never have imagined that "The whole upslope of cosmological and biological life, is radical incarnation… [that] this physical world is not brute matter but has aim and purpose."[7]

The birth of Christ, writes Ilia Delio, is connected to the stars, the galaxies, the planets; the rocks and soil, the trees and fields—and in a particular and incredible way, to the human person.
"God is immersed in the details of materiality…matter matters to God."[8]

> Therefore, "It matters what we do to our bodies, to one another and to the Earth. It matters what we think and the words we use to express our ideas, our emotions, our angers and hurts. It matters that we [marginalize] the poor, the homeless, the factory worker and the immigrant… It matters that we spend 80% of our waking hours with artificial devices and eight minutes a day talking to another person. All of these things matter to God because they can push God out of the world like a homeless person or unwanted immigrant."[9]

The love that rises in the Bethlehem stable is a radical love—aimed to the very root of what ails us—our propensity to forget the oneness of this blue-marble Earth and to abandon the call to live as one, with compassion for all. And "if [this] radical love [we see] in Christ is the heart of our Christian faith," as Delio claims, "then all that we long for is already present; all that we hope for has already arrived but it is not yet complete."

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[6] Richard Rohr, http://email.cac.org/t/ViewEmail/d/747AD23D800FC10C2540EF23F30FEDED/281C5472D20A0A9DC67FD2F38AC4859C
[7] Ilia Delio blog, 12-10-2018, https://www.omegacenter.info/radical-incarnation/
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

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**Where is God? After this night, the question has a new answer:**
**God is made <u>real,</u> <u>knowable</u> and <u>accessible</u> in the fragile, finite child who lies in the manger. And knowing this—knowing him—makes all our relationships new.**

There's a story told about a certain wise Rabbi who had a reputation for asking his students the simplest questions, which often, they discovered, turned out to be the most difficult to answer.

One day, as they gathered around him in the darkness of a winter night to study God's Teaching, he asked them, **HOW CAN ONE KNOW THAT THE NIGHT HAS ENDED AND THE DAY BEGUN?**

"Could it be that moment," one student suggests, "when you can tell the difference between a sheep and a dog?" NO, says the Rabbi, THAT ISN'T IT.

"Is it," says another, "when you can see the difference between an olive tree and a fig tree?"
NO, NOT THAT EITHER, answers the Rabbi.

RATHER, says the Rabbi, IT IS THAT MOMENT WHEN YOU CAN LOOK AT A FACE NEVER SEEN BEFORE AND RECOGNIZE THE STRANGER AS A BROTHER.

UNTIL THAT MOMENT, NO MATTER HOW BRIGHT THE DAY, IT IS STILL NIGHT...

God's gift to us in this child, is to teach us to look at the world, at one another, through those same loving, compassionate eyes with which our Almighty and Altender God looks at us.

For when we view the world through the eyes of the Christchild all those things that hung in the shadows, causing us to fear, things that we hid ourselves from, are now visible, accessible, and transformed by his light.

**Isaiah said:**

> The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in a land of darkness, on them has light shined.

We are those people, and the light we've been given is the light of Emmanuel. Hidden in plain sight in the manger.

Let us pray:
Lord of the galaxies, who made yourself small and vulnerable so we could experience the depth of your love, make us into beacons of hope who shine a world in desperate need of light, and give us the will to follow wherever you lead. We entrust our lives to your hands. Amen.