

Of Shepherds and Astronauts
Christmas Eve – December 24, 2018
Luke 2:1-20

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Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Fifty years ago tonight the astronauts of Apollo 8, the first humans to orbit the moon, were busy taking high-resolution pictures of the moon's surface to prepare for the upcoming moon landings, when suddenly they were struck by the rising earth, a brilliant blue marble hanging in the blackness of space. There was such a striking contrast with the barrenness and colorlessness of the moon's surface. They rushed to load color film into their camera and then took some of the most famous and iconic photographs ever taken. I've put up a couple of them up on television in the narthex that you can look at on your way out. These photographs of the earth gave us a new perspective on our place in the universe. Some have suggested that they played a significant role in the development of the environmental movement. They helped make us aware of just how precarious our existence is, how rare and immensely precious is our planet, and that we are all in this together. It is also astronauts, these and others, who have noticed the artificial nature of our national boundaries and our conflicts over them. There are no national borders visible from space, except where they coincide with rivers or coasts. It was NASA's official policy that all activities conducted in space would be peaceful and for the benefit of all humankind. This was reflected in the plaques left on the moon by the first and last of those missions. Apollo 11's read, "We came in peace for all mankind." Apollo 17's read, "May the spirit of peace in which we came be reflected in the lives of all mankind."

The Apollo 8 astronauts ended their Christmas Eve broadcast fifty years ago by reading the first ten verses of the book of Genesis and then finished with this: "And 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."

I think there are some interesting parallels between the experience of the Apollo 8 astronauts and the shepherds in our Christmas story tonight. First, like the astronauts, the shepherds were preoccupied with their job when this thing happened to them. Of course unlike astronauts, shepherds were not idolized and celebrated. They were menial labors on the margins of society. So the analogy is limited. But it was while they were both focusing on their jobs – the shepherds' of watching and guarding the sheep entrusted to them, the astronauts of photographing the lunar surface – that they were both surprised by a life-changing, perspective-shifting vision.

Second, for both of these groups a message of universal blessing and peace was involved. The American astronauts could have limited their message to their fellow Americans. They could have delivered an in-your-face, nose-thumbing, victory speech about finally passing up the Soviets in the space race and beating them to the moon. ("USA! USA!") But they didn't. Instead their message was a blessing on all the people of the Earth – Americans, Soviets, and everyone else. In a similar way, the Messiah that the shepherds and their people hoped for and expected was one who would come and restore their country to its former glory, one who would crush their foreign enemies and kick them out of their land. It's a familiar sentiment, shared by people ancient and modern. The angels' message didn't give them what they wanted. But it did give them what they needed: a message of peace for all people, peace between God and humankind that leads to peace with one another as well. God's chosen people were to learn that they had

been blessed in order to be a blessing, to be a means for extending God's love and forgiveness to all the people of the earth.

Third, both the astronauts and the shepherds served to inspire others. As I mentioned earlier, the sudden new perspective gained by the Apollo 8 crew and shared through the pictures they took helped to inspire the environmental movement. They also, of course, paved the way for the first lunar landing and all subsequent missions into space, manned and unmanned, that have advanced our understanding of the cosmos and our place in it. The shepherds did something similar. They didn't keep the angels' message to themselves. Once they found the newborn Jesus and his family they shared the angels' message with anyone who listened. The herald angels inspired herald shepherds, who through Luke's witness have in turn inspired us also to be heralds of God's universal message of forgiveness, love, and peace.

I think it's actually hard to appreciate the gifts of both the astronauts and shepherds. Over the past fifty years we have come to take for granted the new perspective they have given us. Now we're talking about setting up permanent bases on the Moon and even Mars. It has become popular to believe that we need to get off of the Earth and move out into space, to other planets and eventually other solar systems, in order for the human species to survive. I don't know whether that's true or not, but it does make it seem a little like the Earth is expendable, which is exactly the opposite impulse that those first images of the Earth from the moon inspired. In a similar way, over the past two millennia we who have heard the angels' message of God's peace and salvation for all people have often had the tendency to privatize the message, to believe, contrary to the radical intent of God's coming among us in Jesus, that God favors us and not others – our family, our clan, our nation. We have turned our Christianity into a badge of pride and division, and made God's universal blessing, the good news of great joy for *all* people, into a private commodity to further our personal and national agendas at the expense of others.

What we need is a reminder, a reminder of the precious gift that the planet Earth is, which has given us life and continues to sustain us, and a reminder of the precious gift that Jesus Christ is to us and all the people of the Earth, given to free us from our deadly, destructive self-centeredness and to draw us into the abundant, selfless, generous life of forgiveness, love, and peace that God has intended for us from the creation of the world. For the former, see those photos on the TV as you leave. For the latter, we're going to do that first by sharing in the sacrament of Holy Communion together, to which we invite all the baptized people of God. See the fine print in the bulletin for details. And second, we are going to finish our service tonight with a reading by candlelight from the first chapter of the Gospel of John. This is the New Testament update of those verses from Genesis read out by the Apollo 8 astronauts 50 years ago. Hear those words again tonight as God timeless message of love and life for you and all people, the good news that the one who was present at the beginning of creation, the word of God through whom everything was made, has come among us as one of us in Jesus Christ, is here for you now in Word and Sacrament, and will go with you throughout your life and make you an instrument of his peace and his life in the world God so loves. May we take that life-changing message to heart, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, and bless all of us, all of us on the good Earth. Amen.