

As the turbulent and tragic year of 1968 drew to a close, three astronauts from Apollo 8 orbited the moon, the first human beings to accomplish this feat. They did so on Christmas Eve. Only six months later, Neil Armstrong would become a household name when taking his first steps on the Moon. On that Christmas Eve, Frank Borman, Jim Lovell and Bill Anders received a glimpse of another world, and through the wonders of technology as they existed then, beamed back both images and sound.

For his part, Anders took the iconic photograph entitled “Earthrise,” giving to us below a unique glimpse of earth, seen from an entirely different perspective. In a sense one could say that while they were sent to explore the moon from close quarters, what they really discovered was an entirely new view of earth. One out of every four people on earth watched or heard this broadcast, including the people of the Soviet Union behind the Iron Curtain, for whom Christmas was still illegal.

Forty years later, Frank Borman recalled: “We were told that on Christmas Eve we would have the largest audience that had ever listened to a human voice...And the only instructions that we got from NASA was to do something appropriate.”¹ And what was their message for humanity? “For all the people back on earth, the crew of Apollo 8 has a message that we would like to send to you. ‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void...’” The three then took turns reading from the book of Genesis 1:1-10.

My brothers and sisters, Christmas invites us to see earth from an entirely new perspective, not just a perspective 240,000 miles from earth as in the lunar orbit, but an eternal perspective, one that is both timeless and immersed in time.

¹ See article and account of Apollo 8 in: www.nasa.gov/topics/history/features/apollo_8.html

Our Gospel today also spoke of beginnings. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” For Christians, nothing compares to the birth of our Savior, and we have marked sacred time ever since. Last night, a text dating from the 5th century– the ancient Christmas proclamation– was chanted: “Today, the twenty-fifth day of December, unknown ages from the time when God created the heavens and the earth and then formed man and woman in his own image.”

A little further, it continues: “In the one hundred and ninety-fourth Olympiad; the seven hundred and fifty-second year from the foundation of the city of Rome..” It concludes: “Today is the nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ according to the flesh.”

Countless Church Fathers would utilize this mode of calculating time as an important teaching tool. Unlike pagan chronology, Christian chronology was also a comprehensive philosophy of history, so that: “...the convert, in abandoning paganism, was compelled to enlarge his historical horizon: he was likely to think for the first time in terms of universal history.”²

It should not trouble us that the Church began to mark time, noting even secular dates such as Olympiads, or the founding of a city. This was to contextualize the life altering, world-changing event of the Incarnation. Jesus Christ is seen as the summit of both sacred and secular history.

As our Lord was gently placed in the crèche at Midnight, we paused in wonder and awe, incensing the crèche. To St. Francis of Assisi, we owe a debt of gratitude for making popular the Nativity creche. He was blessed with remarkable insight into the human condition, knowing of our need to visualize so great a mystery. We Christians have followed his lead, setting up our crèche scenes, both at home and in Church.

² Arnaldo Momigliano, “Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography, page 110. University of Chicago Press, 1977 edition.

Whether you are six or sixty-six, praying before the manger never loses its significance. It is, in a manner, a moment both timeless and ever timely, in a world searching for meaning, too often in the wrong places.

God has fulfillment His promises not only to the world, but to you and me, to our families. Our Savior came in time for each of us and for all of us. Our grateful glance towards God's glory moves naturally today onto the Christ-child, in whom the Father's glory was revealed to us. He reaches his arms out in a gesture of invitation, the innocence of which cannot shield its magnitude. We rejoice because we have been counted among those upon whom God's favors rests.

Today, all of our struggles, disappointments and failures are all placed before the Crib, and laid there to rest, at least for now. For to us a Savior has been born in our midst, and He came to bring light to all the darkness of our lives. The moment is here; there is no more waiting. Our mighty God ventured into the reverent silence, a profound simplicity. He ventured there to find and save us. The Light of Divine Love has come into our world anew. May the joy and happiness of this moment resound in your hearts forever.

(Below next page, "Earthrise," by Lunar Module Pilot William Anders.
Image Credit: NASA)

