

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

Rev. Morgan S. Allen

December 24, 2023

Eve of the Incarnation, Luke 2:1-20

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

Merry Christmas, Trinity Church!

Major General William Anders' blue eyes flash brightly behind features heavy with his 90 years. This April, NASA's Chief Scientist and Senior Climate Advisor, Kate Calvin, interviewed the former astronaut about "Earthrise," the marvel that fate would have Anders capture.²

See, fifty-five years ago today, Apollo 8 – captained by Anders and two colleagues – left the earth's gravitational pull and entered "the vast expanse of interstellar space."³ Having circled our planet for nearly four days, the CSM⁴ coupled its orbital momentum with the craft's power and leapt into the tug of the moon.

Anders, affable and humble, recalls of the launch moment, "I suddenly found myself [in the middle seat of the cockpit] 360 feet [above the ground] ... I looked down below, and there [were] the news media people coming in to park their cars. It was still dark. And I thought to myself, 'They're sending me to the moon!'"⁵

As deep and inky as the cosmos would appear through the porthole window of their spacecraft, the world the astronauts left behind was not without its own darkness. The 1960's had begun with the Bay of Pigs and, not long after, the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. On March 8, 1965, President Lyndon Baines Johnson sent ground troops into Vietnam, effectively escalating that simmering conflict into war, and the very year that launched Apollo 8 had already witnessed the murders of Martin Luther King, Jr, in April, and Robert F. Kennedy, in June.

Domestic unrest and global threats would persist into the approaching decade, as well, headlined by an American president whose ego and ambition demanded the Supreme Court intervene against his tyrannical claims of executive privilege.⁶ About those years, Episcopalian⁷ Madeleine L'Engle wrote "The Risk of Birth, an Advent Poem."⁸ L'Engle begins:

This is no time for a child to be born,
with the earth betrayed by war & hate
and a comet slashing the sky to warn
that time runs out & the sun burns late.

Even so, in defiance of those shadows, some astronomers and physicists chose to *see beyond* the confines and sufferings of their world. Somehow, these engineers and scientists believed enough to *reach beyond* every earthly horizon humankind had ever known.

What must it have been like for Anders and his companions to make that leap literally from one world and into the next?

How must the astronauts have felt to hear their thrusters quiet, to feel themselves suspended in the great hush of the cosmos, waiting for the moon's gravity to draw them near?

Two thousand years ago, at the turn to *Anno Domini*, God's mission seemed in grave peril to anyone who dared pay attention. The ordering of the census marked the press of the imperial thumb on the backs of the Jewish peasant class, those who found themselves a burden to the royalty of their own people, and a nuisance to the empire's authorities who ruled them. In those days, the hillsides and margins of Judaea teemed with the anger of these penurious who had little power to improve their situation. Those suffering disenfranchisement began banding together under the leadership of itinerant preachers, religious prophets, and political dissidents. For the impoverished, these communities were freedom fighters of principle and purpose, seeding hope in the hopeless. For the Jewish leadership, these communities were disorganized troublemakers, threatening their relative comforts. For the Roman government, these communities were terrorist militias, challenging the bloody-won *Pax Romana*. As L'Engle's "Advent Poem" continues:

That was no time for a child to be born,
in a land in the crushing grip of Rome;
honour & truth were trampled by scorn –
yet here did the Saviour make his home.

Yet, in defiance of all that darkness: *Immanuel*. Somehow, a teenaged couple dared *see beyond* the confines and sufferings of their world. Somehow, shepherds believed enough to *journey beyond* the safety of their familiar horizon.

What must it have been like for the Holy Family, to make their leap when the door of the inn slammed shut?

How must they have felt to hear the angels whisper encouragement in the great hush of the manger as – alone ... so alone – they delivered their son in a trough?

In that April interview, General Anders describes taking the “Earthrise” photograph:

They [had given] me a little bit of photography training [and] a camera – a Hasselblad [– to bring home for practice. During the mission, w]e were in lunar orbit upside-down and going backwards. So, for the first several revolutions, we didn’t see the earth ... then we righted ourselves heads-up and [while Mission Commander Frank Borman was twisting the spacecraft so it was going forward,] suddenly I saw out of the corner of my eye this ... color; it was shocking.⁹

In the cockpit audio preserved from this moment, Anders exclaims, “Oh my, God, look at that picture over there! There’s the earth coming up. Wow! Is that pretty.” He asks the third member of their crew, Command Module Pilot, Jim Lovell, to hand him “a roll of color.”¹⁰

Once Anders loads the camera, his colleague – in a moment of gleeful, over-helpfulness, impatiently implores, “Take several of ‘em. Give it to me.” Anders responds patiently: “Wait a minute, just let me get the right setting here now ... Calm down, Lovell.”¹¹ In the cockpit audio, the click-and-advance of the camera then rattles loudly, over and over again.

Anders explains:

I put the long lens on and started snapping away ... Without a light meter, I didn’t really know where to set it, so I took the F-Stop and, just took-a-shot, moved it; took-a-shot, moved it; took-a-shot and moved it again ...¹²

His interviewer, Dr. Calvin, observes, “Most of us only get to see what is right in front of us – the sidewalk, the building, the trees – but when you were in space, you had the opportunity to see [this beautiful] planet as a whole.” She asks, “What was that like?”¹³

Of his remarkable vantage point, Anders observed:

It was Christmastime, and [the earth appeared – about as big as my fist] like a fragile Christmas tree ornament ... [And I knew] We shoot missiles and rockets at each other on this tiny, little place that we call home, the only home in the universe for us humans ... Back then and now, the photograph] makes people think, you know ... Hasn’t made ‘em think enough, but they do think.¹⁴

Then, quoting himself, Anders concludes, “[We travelled to space] to explore the moon, but what we discovered was the earth.”¹⁵

On this Christmas Eve in 2023, the mission of God still feels gravely imperiled: worries and worries and war, war, *war*. Among a catalogue of ills too long and too painful to thumb, let it be

enough for us to realize that at this very hour in the West Bank city of Bethlehem, a congregation arranged their ceramic Nativity amid rocks and rubble, a wrenching devotion set for an empty church so near to Jesus' manger.¹⁶

What might it be like for us to defy the world's gravity – its sin and shame and anger and loneliness and violence and grief?

What might it be like for us to reach beyond every horizon of hurt we have ever known and to labor for the future God still dreams?

L'Engle' concludes her Advent verse:

When is the time for love to be born?
the inn is full on planet earth,
and by a comet the sky is torn –
yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

Oh, friends: God takes the risk of birth because the creation is worth saving ... *we* are worth saving ... *you* are worth saving. From earth to moon; from manger to cross; from the majesty of this night to the magic of tomorrow morning: thanks be to God that Love still takes the risk of birth. On this Eve of the Incarnation, let us once more be born in Love incarnate:

*Oh my, God, look at that picture over there!
There's the beautiful earth coming up. Wow!*

As companions in the household of God,
Amen.

¹ From Psalm 31.

² Calvin, Kate. "Earthrise: A Conversation With Apollo 8 Astronaut Bill Anders." Nasa. April 21, 2023.

³ From "Eucharistic Prayer C" in the *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 370. "At your command all things came to be: the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home."

⁴ NASA referred to the spacecraft itself as the "command and service module," or "CSM." I draw these details from NASA's "[Mission Pages.](#)"

⁵ "[Remembering 1968: How Apollo 8 Sent A Timeless Holiday Greeting From The Heavens.](#)" Cowan, Lee. *CBS Sunday Morning*. December 23, 2018, republished to CBS' website most years.

⁶ [“The Complete Watergate Timeline \(It Took Longer Than You Realize\).”](#) Bush, Daniel. *PBS NewsHour*. [This week’s Supreme Court decision](#) not to take up Special Counsel Jack Smith’s petition to settle the matter of executive privilege does not augur the unanimity of the 1974 decision the required Nixon to turn over “the tapes.”

⁷ L’Engle is interred in the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine in Manhattan. She wrote “The Risk of Birth” in the weeks of the “Saturday Night Massacre” and Nixon’s “most memorable denial: ‘I am not a crook.’”

⁸ “The Risk of Birth” first appeared in an eponymous collection chosen by L’Engle’s friend, Luci Shaw, and published in 1974 by Harold Shaw Publishers. The verse was then included in a 1978 collection entitled, *The Weather of the Heart*.

⁹ “Earthrise: A Conversation With Apollo 8 Astronaut Bill Anders.” I did my best to transcribe the interview, adjusting as indicated to preserve the sense of the conversation in the sermon context.

¹⁰ Ibid. The “Earthrise” interview includes these snippets of audio.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “Earthrise: A Conversation With Apollo 8 Astronaut Bill Anders.” In the interview, Dr. Calvin shares that a large, framed image of “Earthrise” centers her NASA office: “It’s a reminder every day of why we do this: for science, for inspiration, for innovation ... for home.” That will preach.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Of this quote, the humble Anders kicks the dirt at his feet: “It’s hard for me to imagine that I actually said it because it’s so poetic.”

¹⁶ McKernan, Beth and Sufian Taha. [“‘If Jesus was born today, he’d be born under the rubble.’ Bethlehem set for forlorn Christmas.”](#) *The Guardian*, December 24, 2023.