

Knowing Our Place

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In 1968 Apollo 8, with astronauts Frank Borman, James Lovell, and William Anders, set out to orbit the moon and return to Earth. It was the first manned spacecraft to ever leave Earth's orbit.

The focus of our space exploration program has always been outward, looking toward the planets and the stars like pioneers staring across a limitless horizon, wondering what is out there.

And that was certainly true of the three astronauts aboard Apollo 8 as well.

The purpose of the mission was to help prepare for eventual lunar landing, and the crew's almost singular focus was observing and photographing the surface of the moon.

But when the spacecraft rounded the outside of the moon for the first time and the windows pointed for the first time back toward Earth,

the crew took the very first photo of the entire planet, hanging in the void of space.

Perhaps you have seen this photo, it is called “Earth Rise” and shows our planet rising over the horizon of the moon.

Reflecting later on that unplanned photograph, James Lovell commented:

“When we originally went to the moon, our total focus was on the moon, looking back at the Earth was an afterthought, but once we did it I was struck with the sense that it might be the most important reason we went.”

Since then, hundreds of astronauts from countries around the world have traveled to space.

At first, they reported anecdotally the impact that seeing the Earth from space had on them. It was calming, awe-inspiring, and seemed to make so many conflicts and concerns melt away.

The families and friends of astronauts reported similar changes, they noticed that when the astronauts returned they were often more patient, calm, peaceful, and accommodating of others.

A scientist and author named Frank White eventually coined a term for this common experience.

“The Overview Effect.”

This week is the second in a three part series of sermons about science and religion. Last week, I discussed the question of human origins and observed that science and religion can be mutually beneficial disciples when exploring mysteries and big questions not just of where we come from, but why we are here at all.

This week, I would like to explore another place where science and faith work hand in hand: understanding our place in the universe.

This morning's reading from the book of Job presents God with a little bit of a sarcastic side.

Here God is challenging the mortal Job over Job's persistent protests over his own suffering. And as much as we might desire an answer to this profound question as much as Job does, he has become to God a bit like the child who has asked "But, why?" for the 39th time.

And so God reminds Job of how small he is and how little he understands.

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know!"

One part of faith as a probing outward, seeking understanding, striving for answers to our biggest and deepest questions.

But it is easy to forget the equally important part of faith which is a confession of our limitedness, a statement of fact that there are no satisfactory answers to many of our biggest questions, that there is much about life that will always seem cruel and unfair, and that no matter how important each of us is to God, that importance is not singular, God loves everything and everyone else as much as us.

We often describe faith in terms of a personal sense of connection that we feel with God. But another, equally important, goal of faith might be to develop something like the overview effect, to lift our perception as high as possible, to strive to see the world more like God sees it.

What those astronauts saw from space was a single, fragile, interdependent system of flowing and moving clouds.

They saw that the atmosphere which seems so vast to us on the ground is a mere film clinging to the surface of the planet.

And there is also what they did not see.

They did not see property lines or national borders. They did not see a difference between the wealthy nations and the poor ones.

It was as if suddenly so much of what had seemed immensely important lost its power over them, and in its place, a sense of mutuality and connection arose.

We cannot all ride rockets into space.

But I believe that sense, that feeling, that overview effect, is a place where our faith can carry us.

But it will also require us to remember that religion is not an individual exercise. Because if we reduce faith to simply being about each

individual person's relationship with God, then this overview effect really only serves to make us each feel insignificant and small.

But the true power of the overview effect is not how it makes us feel small, it is how it shows us how deeply connected we are to one another and to this planet. It shows us how much we depend on each other, and how senseless the divisions and distinctions we draw really are.

Carl Sagan remembered what the Apollo 8 astronauts had said when almost 25 years later the space probe known as Voyager 1 was about to complete the active phase of its mission to catalogue the planets of the outer solar system, and begin hurtling out into interstellar space.

He asked NASA to have the probe turn around, like those Apollo astronauts did when they were about 200,000 miles from Earth's surface, to look back one last time toward Earth.

At that time, Voyager was 3.7 million miles away from our planet. Most scientists at NASA objected to the idea as a waste of time and energy, after all, from such a distance, the Earth would be barely distinguishable from the distant stars, just another point of light.

Sagan insisted, and photo was taken, a photo which indeed showed the Earth as a barely distinguishable point of light amidst vast, dark, space. It just looked like another star, but for its ever so slight blueish hue.

The photo became known as “The Pale Blue Dot.” Sagan showed that image to the world as part of his Cosmos television series, and when he did he offered this reflection:

“Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives.

The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there - on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors, so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it

underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.”

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To me, Sagan’s photograph of our world at a distance could easily be the source of a religious revival. For it offers for the first time a striking image to show what our faith has long sought to express, that we are each a part of something vastly larger than our wildest imagining.

It would be among the greatest achievements of our faith, if it were to lift our eyes from the pages of our own stories, if it were to make space in our hearts to love even those we will never meet.

If it were to make us care for the children of strangers from another land, as much as we care for our own, if it were to inspire us to treat the health of the ecosystem as we do the health of our bodies.

If it were to lift us up, and up, until we could see the world more like God does.

A fragile, beautiful place, filled with fragile beautiful people, who belong to this planet and who belong to one another, whose action and inaction effect each other. Who depend on one another, who are in this together, whether they realize it or not.

It's what God has been trying to show us all along.