

“Spontaneous Praise”

Luke 2:8-20

49 years ago tonight, three men took turns reading aloud from the Book of Genesis. They were 239,000 miles away from home as the first human beings to leave the earth’s orbit, circle the moon, and see the dark side of our planet’s lone satellite. Their names were Bill Anders, Frank Borman, and Jim Lovell, the astronauts aboard Apollo 8. Along with inspiring the world’s imagination over the course of their mission, they provided an iconic photograph of something no human had ever seen before; a glimpse of the Earth rising above the moon’s horizon.

As part of a Christmas Eve broadcast, the astronauts read into their open microphones from the first chapter of Genesis. “In the beginning God created the heaven and earth,” Bill Anders began. Verse by verse the astronauts shared those Biblical words about light and dark, waters and the firmament before ending “...and God saw that it was good.” Frank Borman then concluded the transmission by saying “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.”

Some of you might remember having heard that reading as it occurred. As a ten-year old boy who was fascinated by the space program, but likely had turned in early that night, I learned of it later. That faithful act by those astronauts did result in a lawsuit from Madeleine O’Hair claiming violation of the First Amendment; eventually it was thrown out by the Supreme Court citing a lack of jurisdiction over events happening at the moon! Yet for most listeners, something else was evoked. “It was one of those moments that brought the world together,” author Eric Metaxas wrote “that helped us see our common humanity as children of God whom he loves equally, and whom he placed on the beautiful planet he made.” (Metaxas, Eric “Christmas Eve in Space and Communion on the Moon,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 25, 2016)

That’s what this night is all about. The events we celebrate once more reveal our shared blessing as recipients of God’s love; something explained in the first reaction to the news: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” That announcement is a beloved part of this night. Along with the decree from Caesar Augustus and a journey by Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, a word to shepherds in the field and their finding the child in a manger, the words from Luke’s account touch a deep place in our heart. There’s a comfort each time in reading or hearing that passage again as it gets us back to the purpose of all of our Christmas preparation, declaring the depth of God’s love for all humankind.

Like most of you, I couldn’t possibly count how many times I’ve heard those verses over the years, but in preparing for tonight noticed something I had missed in every previous encounter with the narrative. It comes after the angel has appeared to shepherds with amazing news and before those herdsmen set off to Bethlehem to check things out for themselves. In between those two moments comes this sentence: “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’” In all the years that I’ve read or heard that account, it never sunk it with me that there was a distinction between the two messengers from that night--the first word from a single angel and the second reaction by the heavenly host. Yet the more I looked closely at that part of that account, the more I was struck by a key difference.

We don’t know much about the heavenly host. Luke’s citation is the only time they are mentioned in the whole New Testament. They appear in the Old Testament many times, most notably when the prophet Isaiah has a vision of God in heaven and the hosts are calling to one another saying “Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts.” Elsewhere, they are described as a heavenly army. Prior to this past week, I had always lumped them in with angels; a synonym for the one who first brought the good news on that night. Yet in reading Luke’s account again a few days ago, I came to realize for the first time that the heavenly hosts and angel were not the same.

Why does it matter? It is only a pastoral version of the “you say to-ma-to, I say to-mah-to” debate? I don’t think so, as to my thinking, it lifts up a difference between the two responses shared with the shepherds. You see, in Scripture, angels are authorized messengers. In all of the Biblical appearances I can think of they show-up only when they have a specific word from God to deliver. The angel who startled shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem, the angel who months earlier had told Mary she would bear God’s son, and the angel who appeared to Joseph in a dream and explained the circumstances of that pregnancy all followed the pattern; they were given a message and they delivered it. Yet the heavenly hosts, based on their previous Biblical record were supposed to stay in God’s eternal realm. We have no Scriptural indication they were ever given a message to deliver, yet in Bethlehem they started singing. They were unauthorized messengers if you will, who as far as we know did not get a word from Jesus’ father to pass on, but still were “praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven...’”

As I began to pay attention to that difference it occurred to me that you and I are more like the heavenly hosts than the lone angel of Bethlehem. With rare exception you and I have not been given specific messages from God to deliver to specific individuals. To be sure, God can and does use our utterances and acts of compassion and even our deeds that disappoint to further divine purposes, but I have never knowingly received a direct word from God to pass on to someone else and suspect that is true for most of you as well.

Yet like the heavenly hosts, we have all known of times when praise welled up that we had to share. It can surface when we see the beauty of nature—whether in a first glimpse of the Rocky Mountains or the Grand Canyon or in that profound awe when witnessing the birth of a child. Praise can emerge when beautiful music feeds our soul or when we finish a well-written book. For others still, praise comes when a plan laid out in the board room or locker room or operating room works to perfection and we begin to celebrate the result. You and I were made for praise and the heavenly hosts encourage us in our own way to follow.

In that same article I mentioned about the broadcast on Christmas Eve in 1968, Eric Metaxas goes on to speak about a less well-known act of faith that occurred on the moon. “Seven months after [the reading from Genesis] Metaxas goes on, ”another NASA spacecraft, Apollo 11, carried two astronauts to the surface of the moon itself. One of them, Commander Edwin ‘Buzz’ Aldrin, thought he might do something similar [to the act by his colleagues on Apollo 8] But what could one do to mark the first time human beings landed on another heavenly body.” As a Presbyterian elder, Aldrin turned to his pastor, Dean Woodruff, from his church in Webster, Texas. ‘Buzz asked me to come up with suggestions on ways he could give thanksgiving for all people,’ Woodruff remembers. Eventually the pastor offered an idea. (“Presbyterian Minister Recalls His Secret Apollo Mission,” <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-2009-07-15-voa9-68747877/410330.html>)

“What if he were to take communion? What is more basic to humanity than bread and wine? He could do it as his own way of thanking God—for the Earth and for everyone on it, and for our amazing ability to do things like build spacecraft that could fly to the moon. So [Woodruff] gave him a small amount of . . . bread and wine and a tiny chalice, and Mr. Aldrin took them with him to the moon. After the Eagle had landed and he and Neil Armstrong sat in the Lunar Module, Mr. Aldrin said this over the radio: ‘This is the LM pilot. I’d like to take this opportunity to ask everyone listening in, wherever they may be, to pause for a moment and contemplate the events of the past few hours and to give thanks in his or her own way.’

“He then ended radio communication,” Metaxas writes “and there, on the silent surface of the moon, read a Bible verse, and took communion. . . .’I opened the little plastic packages which contained the bread and wine,” Aldrin recalled. “I poured the wine into the chalice our church had given me. In the one-sixth gravity of the moon the wine curled slowly and gracefully up the side of the cup.’ [He then] read Jesus’ words from the Gospel of John: ‘I am the vine, you are the branches. Whosoever abides in me will bring forth much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing.’” Aldrin wanted to read those words over the radio broadcast back to Earth, but given the lawsuit started by O’Hair, instead followed NASA’s wishes for silence during that time. “I ate the tiny Host and swallowed the wine,” Aldrin added. “I gave thanks for the intelligence and spirit that had brought two young pilots to the Sea of Tranquility.” (Metaxis citation above).

Certainly you and I were not on the surface of the moon that day any more than we were present in the fields outside Bethlehem when shepherds heard heavenly hosts tell of amazing events there. Yet like them, we can join in offering our praise for all that has occurred, for all that led us here this night, and all the blessings we have experienced from our Maker. Thus making the most natural song for this night one that echoes the first Christmas as we, too, proclaim “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”