



That Strangest Christmas...

Apart from the first one that is, the candidate might be Xmas Eve 1968. Three astronauts—Borman, Lovell and Anders were circling the moon for the first time in their craft Apollo 8. This circumnavigation around the dark side of the moon had never been attempted before so the fears back on earth were immense.

Commander Borman's wife had even made mental arrangements for her husband's funeral, complete with an empty coffin as his corpse putatively circled the earth. But Borman himself was a fairly committed Christian and had been given a special message by a friend back home, a sheet which he Xeroxed on fireproof paper and filed behind the flight plan. With two TV telecasts due to be beamed to earth, Borman had been told by NASA to have "something appropriate" to say to the worldwide audience. And now it was Christmas Eve with their fragile home in space circling the moon for the ninth time.

The appointed hour came and Borman shocked all earthlings—and especially the technocrats who ran NASA—by producing the special fireproof paper behind the flight plan. So as the world watched and waited, systems expert Bill Anders set the stage.

"For all the people back on earth the crew of Apollo 8 has a message they would like to send to you..." Anders then read the familiar words "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and the earth was without form and void.*" The words "without form and void," Frank Borman said later, seemed singularly appropriate as they looked away from the lunar desolation to "the one planet in the solar system that had achieved life," the Earth.

Each astronaut took turns in reading from Genesis 1 and Borman ended the words with overtones of a nostalgic and gentle homesickness in his voice: "To all of you from the crew of Apollo 8—good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas and God bless all of you, all of you on the Good Earth."

As Borman later confessed, to see the Earth rising beyond the moon on Christmas Eve was all the confirmation he needed of the existence of a Creator.

Some people were exceedingly moved by all this. One wrote it was the second greatest Christmas story ever. A humorous sidelight was when a noted atheist sued NASA in 1969 for using public funds for religious purposes. The Supreme Court concluded that "the matter was out of their jurisdiction."

Later in July, 1969 Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin would push the envelope a little further by conducting a private Communion service in the lunar module as he and Neil Armstrong waited to set foot on the moon.

This was all, as ancient writers might say, "passing strange," part of the greatest story *never told* behind the space missions. This Christmas it should be remembered how one of humanity's superb technological feats—circumnavigating the moon and the glimpses we got of our rare jewel in the cosmos—led our thoughts back to God. Truly, "the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1).

Then, too, there has always been something "otherworldly" about the great events surrounding Christmas—a Messiah born in a stable, three astronomers following a star, uncouth shepherds enlisted by heavenly beings to be the first evangelists.

So, it seems fitting that God was able to get glory—even inadvertently—from the secular whiz-kids who ran NASA by having his words beamed back to earth on that memorable Christmas Eve, 1968. The incident gives deeper meaning to the honorary title given to the Christ child we venerate on December 25, "Immanuel." The words mean "God with us" and that means everywhere and at all time...even from the Moon.

Neil Earle

Neil Earle is a retired pastor and online teacher and journalist with his own web site, asecondlook.info
