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Yuri Gagarin was one of twenty fighter pilots chosen to be a part of the first group of cosmonauts in 1960. All underwent intense medical examination and preparation for space travel. Gagarin became the first human to enter outer space on April 12, 1961, and was proclaimed the "Columbus of the Cosmos" by the Soviets. Sergei Korolev, the head of the USSR space program had personally chosen Gagarin to be the first cosmonaut.

According to the International Space Hall of Fame website: "Gagarin entered space aboard the Soviet spaceship/satellite Vostok 1, a small one-man spherical descent module with a diameter of less than seven and half feet that was mounted on top of an instrument module containing the engines. The cosmonaut was strapped into an ejection seat, from which he would exit the descent module upon re-entry, parachuting to earth once well within the atmosphere".

Cosmonaut Gagarin felt that it was his job to report as much information as he could during his 108 min flight orbiting the earth. Some of his statements during the flight were: ""I see Earth! It is so beautiful!"

"What beauty. I saw clouds and their light shadows on the distant dear earth . .

"When I orbited the Earth in a spaceship, I saw for the first time how beautiful our planet is. Mankind, let us preserve and increase this beauty, and not destroy it!"

One of the famous quotes attributed to him may have been actually written by the Russian Government itself as a propaganda tool. It read: "I looked and looked but I didn't see God."

Fast forward 8 years. On Dec 21<sup>st</sup> 1968, Apollo 8 launched, from Cape Kennedy, carrying three astronauts on a mission to orbit the moon. They were to check out the moon's surface for possible landing sites and to see how the moon's gravity might affect a lunar module. One of their main goals was to photograph as much of the moon's surface as possible. But the most iconic

photo was unplanned and unexpected. As they orbited the moon, in the blackness of space, the earth suddenly appeared over the horizon. That photo was called "Earthrise".

Taken by astronaut Bill Anders, this iconic picture shows Earth peeking out from beyond the lunar surface. Anders said; "It was the most beautiful, heart-catching sight of my life, one that sent a torrent of nostalgia, of sheer homesickness, surging through me. It was the only thing in space that had any color to it. Everything else was either black or white, but not the Earth." Borman's crewmate, Jim Lovell, described just what it was about the Earthrise that was so arresting: "Up there, it's a black-and-white world. There's no color. In the whole universe, wherever we looked, the only bit of color was back on Earth ... It was the most beautiful thing there was to see in all the heavens. People down here don't realize what they have."

Another iconic moment happened on Christmas Eve. It was estimated that millions of people either watched or listened to the broadcast from space. The astronauts had been told by NASA to "say something appropriate". What they did was to read Genesis 1: 1-10, beginning with; "1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth". I have to imagine that this was one of the most dramatic readings of Genesis ever done. Many folks at that time, did look, and did see God.

I was 15 yo at the time and unfortunately, do not have any recollection of this event at all.

Why the Space History? As many of you know, yesterday was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Apollo 11 and the lunar surface landing. A lot of this history has been in the news over the past week.

Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin stood on the stark desolate surface of the moon and were able to look out and see the fragile beauty of the Earth. I cannot imagine the thoughts and feelings that the astronauts had as they went about their tasks on the moon's surface. I am sure that some of those thoughts

were kept to themselves as they had to be careful with any public references of God. NASA was still dealing with a lawsuit brought by atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair due to the reading from Genesis by the astronauts of Apollo 8. Regardless, it would seem highly unlikely that one could stand on the surface of the moon and **not** consider the immenseness of God and the smallness of humankind.

This morning, it seems like we have polarizing opposites to consider. The very human Jesus sitting with Mary at his feet, listening to his every word, and Martha busying herself with dinner preparations. On the other hand, we hear Paul's description of Jesus from Colossians; "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in\* him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in\* him all things hold together".

Jesus from the Gospel vs Jesus, the source of creation. Intellectually, we know both to be true, but sometimes our hearts need to be reminded. Just as the astronauts tried to express to the world what they were experiencing and seeing, with words that must have seemed inadequate, one can imagine the impact of Paul's words at the time they were written. To the pagan world, those words upended everything.

"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." Think about it. The fullness of God dwelling inside a carpenter from Nazareth. It is no wonder that many in the time of Paul had problems digesting this. Mary experienced the fullness of God in the garden outside of the tomb. Then others also experienced this. As Paul attests, in 1 Corinthians 15:5-7, "He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

Jesus, both divine and fully human. The Word made Flesh. Many today look and look and do not see God.

The Author of Genesis describes the immensity of the universe although he'd never seen it as the astronauts did. He describes "a formless void" and darkness that "covered the face of the deep." Looking up at the earth from the surface of the moon surely must have been a beautiful and magnificent sight, but it also had to elicit a certain sense of the tenuous, delicate nature of the Earth itself and our existence as the human race. A small beautiful planet surrounded by darkness and death. And yet, our vision is still so restricted and minute as compared with all of God's creation. Despite the vastness of Almighty God, our creator, the source of all life, loved and cared about each one of us so much that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. As unfathomable as that fact sometimes seems to us, nevertheless, it is a truth that we accept and believe. This same Jesus who dined with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus was present at the creation of the universe. As amazing as that is, we still often question what He is doing and how He does it. Or we get irritated because things don't happen when we think they should or in a way that suits us. No matter how bleak things may look from our limited point of view, God sees and knows everything.

For me, it is so important to realize that Jesus knows and loves each of us intimately, yet he also has a view of all of creation throughout time and eternity that we cannot possibly know or understand.

50 years ago, even if for a brief moment in time, the world was united and people cared about what was happening thousands of miles away. Maybe for the first time, we had a view of our small place in the universe and just how isolated we really were in the big picture. It would have been nice if we could have moved much further ahead in caring about each other and taking care of this precious earth that we live in. 50 years later, I do not think we have come very far. For those who are Christians, we know that it is up to us to be the

hands and feet of Jesus in this world. To be the only Jesus that some will ever know. To tell others how much God loves them. To treat others with the love and dignity that they deserve. To take care of our environment and protect it not only for ourselves but for those who come after. These are not lofty distant goals that we strive to attain someday. The time is now. After all, if we manage to destroy this world, at least for now, Two Men and a Spaceship have nowhere to move us.

Often, it may seem difficult to look around and see God in the midst of chaos, but if we try, God is everywhere and is in control. I looked and looked and I saw God.

AMEN