

## THEN AS NOW . . . HOPE!: CHRISTMAS 1968 AND THE PHOTOGRAPH THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

By Drew Dellinger

*"If we are to have peace on earth . . . we must develop a world perspective."*

—Martin Luther King Jr., December 24, 1967

*"Oh, my God! Look at that picture over there! Here's the earth coming up. Wow, is that pretty!"*

—Commander Frank Borman, Apollo 8, December 24, 1968

Forty-one years ago, on Christmas Eve 1968, an astronaut orbiting the moon took a photograph that changed the world. As we remember one of the most heart-breaking years in our history, it is worth remembering that the year of trauma ended in triumph.



As '68 dawned, the Tet offensive dispelled illusions of easy victory in Vietnam. On April 4 of that year, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the world's most visible and visionary activists for

justice was shot down in Memphis, triggering waves of outrage and sadness as more than 100 cities burst into flames of despair and rebellion. Two months later, Bobby Kennedy was shot and killed in Los Angeles.

Throughout '68, student protests and general uprisings broke out in Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere. In Mexico City, the Summer Olympics set the stage for the raised-fist defiance of John Carlos and Tommie Smith. In August, police and demonstrators clashed violently at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

This was the troubled world that the crew of Apollo 8 left behind in December, as they became the first humans to journey around the moon. Just as it seemed the world was falling apart, the astronauts on Apollo 8 took a photograph that would bring us all together, and forever change our image of the planet and ourselves.

In 1948, the British astronomer Fred Hoyle predicted that “once a photograph of the Earth, taken from outside, is available . . . a new idea as powerful as any in history will be let loose.” The earliest attempts at such a photo were not particularly impressive. The first photograph of Earth from space was transmitted by a US Explorer satellite in August of 1959. The picture was badly blurred. Other images were better but were never shared with the general public.

In 1966, a visionary college student named Stewart Brand created and sold buttons which read, “Why Haven’t We Seen A Photograph of the Whole Earth Yet?” Apparently Brand’s “Photograph of the Whole Earth” campaign played a role in spurring NASA to procure high-quality photos of the planet from distant space. In November 1967, *National Geographic* magazine published the first color photograph of the whole Earth ever taken. In the fall of '68, Stewart Brand would publish such an image on the cover of his influential *Whole Earth Catalog*.

But the photograph taken by the Apollo 8 astronauts on Christmas Eve of '68 would have a special resonance in the world’s imagination . . . perhaps because it was taken by human hands and not a satellite . . . perhaps because it included the edge of the moon in the foreground, thus providing the element of Earth as seen from the perspective of another celestial body.

A year before the Apollo 8 mission, on December 24, 1967, Dr. King, had stood in his pulpit at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta—his last Christmas Eve on Earth—and proclaimed that “If we are to have peace on earth . . . we must develop a world perspective.”

“As nations and individuals, we are interdependent,” preached King. “It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality.”

One year later, Dr. King’s prophetic call for a “world perspective” would be realized, as the three crew members aboard Apollo 8 captured an image of Earth that the world had never seen.

Frank Borman, Jim Lovell, and Bill Anders were the first humans to see Earth from space in its wholeness, as a unity. The astronauts were astonished the first time they saw Earth emerging around the edge of the moon's horizon.

During their fourth orbit around the lunar sphere, the crew, scouting out landing sites for later Apollo missions, was engrossed in photography of the moon's surface when Frank Borman glimpsed something. "Oh, my God!" he exclaimed, "Look at that picture over there! Here's the Earth coming up. Wow, is that pretty!"

"Hey, don't take that, it's not scheduled," joked Anders.

As the crew laughed, Anders asked Lovell to pass him a camera with color film inside.

"Hurry up! Got one?" Anders, growing impatient as Lovell searched, repeated.

"Anything, quick," said Anders again, and then, "Well, I think we missed it."

Finally, Lovell got the color camera to Anders, but soon Lovell seemed to wish he had kept it for himself as he had had an excellent vantage from his window.

As Anders photographed the Earth emerging from around the moon all three men grasped the significance of what they were seeing,.

"You got it?" asked Lovell.

"Yes," replied Anders.

"Well, take several of them," chimed in Borman.

"Take several of them!" repeated Lovell excitedly. "Here, give it to me."

"Wait a minute, . . . just calm down," Anders responded.

"Calm down, Lovell," said Borman.

"Well, I got it right—Oh, that's a beautiful shot," said Lovell, longing for the color camera. "Vary the exposure a little bit."

"I did. I took two of them," said Anders.

"You sure we got it now?" pressed Lovell.

"Yes," Anders replied.

The crew of Apollo 8 had successfully captured an image that would alter human consciousness. There it was: The radiant, living Earth; resplendent in space; juxtaposed against the barren lunar landscape and the dark expanse; floating; infinitely beautiful; sunlit against the

black cosmos; wet with oceans and alive with swirling clouds. The iconic “Earthrise” picture would later be called “the single most influential environmental photograph ever taken.”

That evening, the crew did a live Christmas Eve television broadcast, and up to a billion people around the world tuned in and saw the Earth as they never had before. Days later, when the Apollo 8 capsule splashed down, television reporter David Brinkley said, “The human race, without many victories lately, had one today.” After the mission, Commander Frank Borman received a telegraph from a stranger that simply read, “Thank you Apollo 8. You saved 1968.”

And just as Fred Hoyle had predicted, a powerful new idea was unleashed—a new era of ecology and environmental consciousness was born.

In 1970, the nascent “Earth Day” erupted into a national event with 20 million participants. Joni Mitchell’s song “Big Yellow Taxi” flooded the airwaves with its cautionary tale of trees in a museum, birds and bees decimated by DDT, and foolish humans who “don’t know what they’ve got ’til it’s gone.” On late-night television, Johnny Carson joked about a man fishing from a pier into water so polluted that when he turned around, “His worm made a break for it.”

In 1971, Marvin Gaye released his album “What’s Going On,” with the song “Mercy, Mercy Me (The Ecology),” perhaps the most poignant environmental anthem ever penned. Gaye’s haunting lyrics evoked poison wind, fish full of mercury, radiation, oil spills, overcrowded landscapes, and dying birds and animals. How much more abuse from humans can the planet stand? asked Gaye.

In 1972, the first international conference on the environment was held in Stockholm, and the Club of Rome issued its ground-breaking report, “The Limits to Growth.” In 1973, the Endangered Species Act was passed.

Clearly, something had shifted.

But four decades after that revelatory “Earthrise” photograph, our precious planet is more imperiled than ever. Though the impact of the photograph of Earth from space is undeniable, we have yet to fully integrate its lesson.

As in 1968, unexpected surprises/breakthroughs may yet redeem us. May we bathe ourselves in the message of Earthrise . . . then as now, hope!

*An earlier version of this essay appeared on [Drew Dellinger’s blog](#).*

*Drew Dellinger ([@drewdellinger](#)) is the founder of Planetize the Movement and the author of Love Letter to the Milky Way. [drewdellinger.org](#)*