

Read also Matthew 4:12-17

On Monday, NASA achieved a huge goal. The spacecraft called “InSight” landed safely on Mars. It is an accomplishment that took years of planning by scientists and engineers who wanted to study Mars to learn about earth. The spacecraft was launched in May and covered 3 million miles in seven months to touchdown. Every step from liftoff to landing was filled with the potential for failure. It was a risk but one they were willing to take. NASA scientists and engineers are well-informed by past successes and failures which made them hopeful.

They have worked toward this plan for a long time.

During the mission there were periods where the creators lost connection with the spacecraft and had to trust that technological designs would work. When “InSight” landed, folks were out of their seats and cheering as if they had won the championship game for which they had worked for years.

You probably know the elation of working hard, the ups and downs, and finally succeeding.

God knows, too. God is the Creator and thus owner of us and the entire universe. God has calculated a good outcome for us. But we do not always see it. We get distracted by the voice of our world and we often miss God’s superintending presence throughout the universe. But God has a goal to redeem His earth—and us—from darkness.

There are many steps to God’s plan for our world. Just as “InSight” was not accomplished easily, so God patiently works to bring his plan to fruition.

Fifty years ago, during Advent on December 21, 1968 another spacecraft, Apollo 8, launched with three astronauts onboard, and three days later, on Christmas Eve, it circled the moon. To reach its destination, Apollo 8 traveled through 238,900 miles of darkness. But light shined on their destination (the moon) and during their final orbit, in a live broadcast the astronauts took turns reading these words while showing pictures of earth from their spacecraft.



“Earthrise”¹

Astronaut William Anders began,

“For all people back on earth the crew of Apollo 8 has a message we would like to send to you.” And he and the others took turns reading Genesis 1:1-10.

Astronaut Anders read:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters and God said, let there be light. And there was light. And God saw the light and it was good, and God divided the light from the darkness.

Astronaut James Lovell read:

And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day. And God said, let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters. And let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament. And divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament. And it was so. And God called that firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.

Astronaut Frank Borman read:

And God said let the waters under the heavens be gathered together in one place. And let the dry land appear. And it was so. And God called the dry land earth. And the gathering together of the waters He called the seas. And God saw that it was good.

Astronaut Borman concluded the reading with these words:

“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.”²

¹ Photo by William Anders. Credits: NASA. See https://www.nasa.gov/topics/history/features/apollo_8.html, accessed November 28, 2018.

² Ibid. To hear the video see the link above. “Apollo 8 Christmas at the Moon,” accessed November 28, 2018.

God is the Creator and owner of the good earth.

Look at the difference between the moon and the earth. The earth is suspended in darkness, yet is light itself. Look at the color of its blue water, compared to the barrenness of the moon. The earth has everything we need to sustain life. Should we not, as creatures, listen to God's words and look for evidence of him in our world? Shouldn't that be the most natural thing in the world? But darkness casts its shadow through selfishness, greed, and sin often preventing us from seeing God's presence and obeying God's words. Darkness makes it seem very fragile and lonely, sort of vulnerably suspended out there.

Yet God persists in bringing light. Listen for the light in a very dark time for God's people. Can you hear God's persistent hand in redeeming the darkness? READ 1 Samuel 3:1-10

God's calling Samuel four times allowed both Samuel and Eli to get the picture. And now you have been given the picture through the story. Let's look deeper.

It is a dark time:

- ~ The word of the Lord was rare (3:1)
- ~ Visions were not widespread (3:1)
- ~ Eli's eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see (3:2)

The previous chapter tells us about darkness in the clergy:

- ~ Eli greedily took the choicest parts of the people's offerings for himself and his two sons (2:29)
- ~ Eli's two sons blasphemed God and abused women in God's temple and Eli refused to restrain them. (2:22—25, 3:13)

Eli is abusing his God-given authority and others are injured.

But, the lamp of God had not yet gone out (3:3). God would overcome these evil priests and raise up Samuel, a faithful priest, who would pave the way eventually, for Jesus. God cares. God has plans. God overcomes darkness so that his truth can minister to you, and you discover the true light, Jesus Christ. God will not be dissuaded from his plan by any circumstance that we might experience. God's world is one of light, not darkness.

What darkness would you like God to redeem with light? *Fear with courage? Anxiety with peace? A difficult relationship with healing? Weak conscience with strong conviction?* Seeking light is a risk worth taking.

We just completed a plan to accept an invitation to sing Handel's *Messiah* at Carnegie Hall in New York City. That goal took eleven months of hard work. We had to invite singers, make travel arrangements, learn the music, raise money, broadcast this great opportunity around town again and again. Many of you compiled a cookbook and held a large garage

sale to help raise money. Did I mention practice, practice, practice? And pray, pray, pray because this was a costly RISK.

But it was also an experience of a lifetime to sing with eighteen choirs from all over the world about overcoming the darkness of sin with the light of Jesus Christ because Jesus is the only one who can do it.

The choir stuck with it, the staff stuck with it, you stuck with it. It takes all of us, and over the next couple of weeks, we will be thanking you. With God's help, we did it because God wants his light to continue to go out. Jesus said, "I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in Me should remain in darkness (John 12.46)." He also said you are the light of Christ. (Matthew 5:3)

God has stuck with his plan to redeem—to overcome darkness with light. It makes all the difference. God loves his creation.

When the thread of light grows dim, when there are few voices for God; when people turn away, God moves out those who turn to darkness, even clergy, to make way for his Messiah. So God moved Eli out and Samuel in with the instruction, "tell the truth exactly as I tell you." God still does this today, pushing darkness back to keep his lamp lit so that the light of his Word and life can redeem.

With God, the light that overcomes darkness never goes out.

Advent is given to us so we can explore these things, for God's plan for you is that His light will redeem your darkness.

Jesus said, "Walk in the light while you can, so the darkness will not overtake you. Those who walk in the darkness cannot see where they are going. Put your trust in the light while there is still time; then you will become children of the light." (John 12:35-36)

Will you take a risk, lay aside the busyness of the season, and go deeper? Even though there are successes and failures, ups and downs, God's light never goes out. Discover the beautiful, bright hope of the light.

AMEN