

# The Overview Effect

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Preaching on:  
Psalm 19

Recently, a buddy of mine, Rev. Michael Ellick, out of Seattle, preached a sermon that inspired to write this sermon. So, thank you, Michael.

I think most of us probably have some sort of understanding that nature is closely connected to spirituality. Most of us have probably had an experience of walking in the woods and feeling a profound sense of inner peace and interconnection to the web of life all around us. Or of being struck by the beauty of some breathtaking mountaintop vista and suddenly all the chatter in your mind quiets down out of respect. Or at 5 a.m., before the world has begun to bustle, the reddish light of a summer sunrise suffusing the moist air of morning seizes your imagination and the whole world seems suddenly alive and filled with magic. But Psalm 19 asks us to go further than all that.

Psalm 19 tells us that knowledge about God is being declared by God's creation. *The heavens are telling the glory of God! Day pours forth speech; night declares knowledge. BUT there is no speech, no words, no voice is heard—yet their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world.* What kind of knowledge can only be communicated without words? Well, this morning there's a visual aid for you on the cover of your bulletin.

This photo was snapped by the Apollo 17 mission on its way back home to Earth. It's called *Blue Marble*. This wasn't the first photograph of the Earth taken from space. Other famous photos, like *Earthrise* (a photo of the Earth rising in the inky blackness of space above the moon's surface), came before it. But *Blue Marble* was the first perfect portrait of our home planet from an outside perspective. It balances the viewpoint of the Earth being nothing more than what Carl Sagan famously called "a pale blue dot" in space with the ability to instantly recognize "the face" of our home. And so it became one of the most influential photographs of the 20th century. It became an icon of the fledging environmental movement. But it represents, I think, an even larger cultural shift in perspective that is only just beginning.

Only about 600 people so far have been to space. And while the photos are powerful and have had a profound impact on our understanding of our planet and our place on it, from what I understand, the photos pale in comparison to the actual experience of seeing the Earth first-hand from space—which according to many astronauts is a life-changing, consciousness-shifting, spiritual, mystical experience of the highest order. The experience has been called "The Overview Effect." Basically, when the Earth is seen from an outside perspective, when all of nature, and all of humanity, and the location, the setting of everything we have ever known or done all comes into view and can be taken in at a glance, a new knowledge—the kind of knowledge which is totally and utterly beyond the ability of words to communicate—is experienced.

Astronaut William Anders (who captured the photo *Earthrise*) said about his trip to the moon, "We came all this way to explore the Moon, and the most important thing is that we discovered the Earth."

Astronaut Russel Schwiekert said, "When you go around the Earth in an hour and a half, you begin to

recognize that your identity is with that whole thing... and that makes a change... it comes through to you so powerfully.”

Astronaut Edgar Mitchel, who ranked seeing Earth from space as the most important and influential event of his life, said, “You develop an instant global consciousness, a people orientation, an intense dissatisfaction with the state of the world, and a compulsion to do something about it.”

Neil Armstrong said, “It suddenly struck me that that tiny pea, pretty and blue, was the Earth. I put up my thumb and shut one eye, and my thumb blotted out the planet Earth. I didn’t feel like a giant. I felt very, very small.”

We’re beginning to see here, perhaps, how the Overview Effect connects to the season of Lent and everything we’ve been talking about the last few weeks. I think when astronauts go up there and see the Earth, they instantly and instinctually recognize that they are in the presence of something Holy. This new perspective on the Earth pulls them beyond expectation and language into a numinous experience. (The Holy, to me, is not an idea, not a category, it’s an experience.)

Now, as we have learned, being in the presence of the Holy—experiencing it—is not always everything our consumer spiritual culture likes to emphasize—it’s not all bliss, and blessings, and positive vibes. Sometimes, the Holy will knock you down! It’ll take you out! The experience of tremendous awe in the presence of that which is bigger than me is sometimes even called “the *fear* of God!”

In 2021, William Shatner—who everybody knows as Captain Kirk from *Star Trek*—at 90-years old finally went to space—for real—thanks to Jeff Bezos of Amazon fame, aboard his Blue Origin rocket. This was a huge publicity stunt, of course. Bezos (or more likely his publicity team) recognized that we’re way more interested in Shatner going to space than any billionaire. And I’m sure they were dreaming of what Captain Kirk would say when he got back to Earth. *Wow! What an experience! Best experience of my life! Let’s all boldly go to space aboard Blue Origin rockets!* But that’s not what they got.

Instead, on his space flight, Shatner experienced what he described as both “the most profound experience I can imagine” and “the strongest feelings of grief” of his life. He was filled with “overwhelming sadness.” He told NPR, “I was crying. I didn’t know what I was crying about. I had to go off some place and sit down and think, what’s the matter with me? And I realized I was in grief.” He wrote in his memoir, “My trip to space was supposed to be a celebration; instead, it felt like a funeral.”

Now, we’re beginning to see how the Overview Effect connects us to Jesus’ Lenten teachings about dying to the self, about losing your life to save your life. What is so uncomfortable about big shifts in perspective like the Overview Effect is that the knowledge that we receive is usually bigger—sometimes far bigger—than the container—bigger than me. And so what happens when I realize that I am too small a container for the next stage of my own development? What happens when God speaks

a knowledge to me that cracks me open from the inside? Something has got to be let go of. Something has to get out of the way. Something I'm very attached to has to die, so that something bigger can be born from it.

Space philosopher Frank White, who coined the term "the Overview Effect," tells us that enough people have been up and reported this experience that we can begin to get a sense of the initial pattern. It may very well start off feeling like a death or a trauma, but over time we get to a resurrection shift in consciousness—astronauts stop identifying with one small part of the globe, one side of politics, one small set of beliefs. They begin to see themselves—and all of humanity—as part of a much larger whole. This holistic perspective fosters a profound sense of unity, compassion, and responsibility for our planet and each other. The experience of that which is bigger than me is not an experience designed by God to keep us small; it's designed to help us grow.

You and I are probably not going to make it to space anytime soon. But part of the goal of Lent is to catch a glimpse—some firsthand experience—of a greater perspective, a holy perspective. This isn't always easy to achieve. Lacking rocket boosters to take us to heaven we sometimes must travel in the other direction—unwinding ourselves down into the spiritual underworld through the prayer and fasting; humility and denying ourselves the comforts of the ego-driven perspectives that are our common companions at other times of the year. Whether we're looking down at the Earth or humbling ourselves upon the Earth, the goal is the same—the realization that we are not entirely what we think we are. And when we let go of our attachment to the smaller thing we think we are, we enable ourselves to connect to the greater thing that God is helping us to become.