

Apollo 8: Christmas on the moon

22 December 2010



Apollo 8, the first manned mission to the moon, entered lunar orbit on Christmas Eve, Dec. 24, 1968. That evening, the astronauts held a live broadcast from lunar orbit, during which they showed pictures of the Earth and moon as seen from their spacecraft. Credit: NASA

Christmas Eve, 1968. As one of the most turbulent, tragic years in American history drew to a close, millions around the world were watching and listening as the Apollo 8 astronauts -- Frank Borman, Jim Lovell and Bill Anders -- became the first humans to orbit another world.

As their command module floated above the lunar surface, the [astronauts](#) beamed back images of the [moon](#) and Earth and took turns reading from the book of Genesis, closing with a wish for everyone "on the good Earth."

"We were told that on Christmas Eve we would have the largest audience that had ever listened to a human voice," recalled Borman during 40th anniversary celebrations in 2008. "And the only instructions that we got from NASA was to do something appropriate."

"The first ten verses of Genesis is the foundation of many of the world's religions, not just the Christian religion," added Lovell. "There are more people in other religions than the Christian religion around the world, and so this would be appropriate to that

and so that's how it came to pass."

The mission was also famous for the iconic "Earthrise" image, snapped by Anders, which would give humankind a new perspective on their home planet. Anders has said that despite all the training and preparation for an exploration of the moon, the astronauts ended up discovering Earth.

The Apollo 8 astronauts got where they were that Christmas Eve because of a bold, improvisational call by NASA. With the clock ticking on President Kennedy's challenge to land on the moon by decade's end, delays with the lunar module were threatening to slow the [Apollo program](#). So NASA decided to change mission plans and send the Apollo 8 crew all the way to the moon without a [lunar module](#) on the first manned flight of the massive Saturn V rocket.

The crew rocketed into orbit on December 21, and after circling the moon 10 times on Christmas Eve, it was time to come home. On Christmas morning, mission control waited anxiously for word that Apollo 8's engine burn to leave lunar orbit had worked. They soon got confirmation when Lovell radioed, "Roger, please be informed there is a Santa Claus."

The crew splashed down in the Pacific on December 27. A lunar landing was still months away, but for the first time ever, men from Earth had visited the moon and returned home safely.

Provided by JPL/NASA

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