

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

At 2 o'clock on Thursday afternoon, January 19, 2006, an Atlas 5 rocket blasted off from Cape Canaveral, Florida. The rocket launch sent a 1000 pound spacecraft the size of a baby grand piano into space. Since then, the spacecraft has been traveling at the speed of 36,000 miles per hour. This past Tuesday, at 7:49 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, the New Horizons spacecraft finally reached its destination as it made the closest approach in human history to the sub-planet Pluto, passing by at a distance of 7,767 miles. Think about that — New Horizons has flown for almost 3,500 days or about 83,000 hours at 36,000 miles per hour, for a total distance of almost 3 billion miles! And it just now reached the outer limits of OUR solar system!

Early last week, a friend posted a picture on Facebook from the Banner Creek Observatory and Science Center in Holton, Kansas. The picture was from the observatory's collection of "Serious Wonder Photos." The picture was taken from the Curiosity Rover on the surface of the planet Mars. In the foreground you see part of the red surface of the planet. The sky is a mix of orange and gray. In the center of the picture are three white dots in a line in the sky. Compared to the landscape, horizon, and sky, the white dots are a little bigger than pinpricks. The bottom white dot has an arrow pointing at it, along with the words "You are here."

The caption says, "This is a picture from the Curiosity Rover on Mars showing earth from the perspective of Mars. You are literally looking at your home from the perspective of another planet." The comment from the folks at the observatory says, "Imagine all the drama and conflict contained on that tiny dot."

The psalmist writes, "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:1, 3-4)

If we were to rewrite that psalm, we might say something like, "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! When I look at pictures from Pluto — 3 billion miles away — or see the tiny dot that is Earth as viewed from Mars, what are human beings that you are mindful of us, mortals that you care for us?"

But the psalmist continues, "Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Psalm 8:5,9)

Let's bring it back to down to earth, shall we? Since Nancy and I returned from our trip to Seoul, many people have asked, "Did you have a good time? How was the

flight?” Well, let me put it this way: at times between Detroit and Seoul, I felt like we were flying on New Horizons — not so much because of the speed of the plane, but because it felt like it was taking nine and a half years to get there! We didn’t come anywhere close to flying 3 billion miles, but the 6,600 miles from Detroit to Seoul was plenty far!

Let me tell you about a different perspective . . .

We arrived at Incheon Airport at about 6:00 p.m. on Friday night. Incheon is a huge, ultra-modern airport. Fortunately, we didn’t have any problems navigating through immigration and customs and retrieving our luggage. Natalie met us for a tearful and happy reunion, then we bought tickets for the high-speed train from the airport to downtown Seoul. The trip took about an hour. When we got off the train, we made our way to the subway station and rode the car to the stop near our hotel in the Myeong Dong area of Seoul. When we climbed the steps from the subway and walked out onto the streets of downtown Seoul, we realized we weren’t in Duplin County any longer!

Seoul is a modern city of 10 million people. We stayed in the center of Seoul, just a few blocks from the historical heart of the city. The hotel is also located in the center of Seoul’s business and shopping districts — just a few blocks from City Hall and the U.S. Embassy. When we came up from the subway tunnel, there was lots of traffic, plenty of lights, many skyscrapers, and people everywhere who were heading home from work or heading out for their Friday night.

During the following week, we saw some very interesting sights:

- * palaces dating from the 14th century located right in the middle of modern Seoul
- * the Olympic Park from the 1998 Seoul Summer Games
- * the beautiful Cheonggyecheon Stream and river walk right in the middle of the city, where people were relaxing and strolling by the restored stream
- * a lovely lake and park where many, many people were enjoying a Sunday afternoon picnic, bike ride, walk, or board game. [We were approached by a shy group of Korean schoolgirls who looked like they were in their very early teens. One of them asked, in very good English, if she could interview us for a school project. She asked Nancy, “Why are you here today?” Nancy told her we had come to Seoul to pick up our daughter who had been studying at the university for a year. The girl then asked, “Do you like it?” After we enthusiastically said yes, they ran off, giggling.]
- * Yonsei University, where Natalie studied for the year, a school with almost 39,000 students and 4,500 faculty members. The university has its roots in the Chosun Christian College that was founded by a Protestant missionary named Horace Underwood in 1915 and in the Severance Union Medical College that was founded by a Presbyterian missionary named Horace Newton Allen. The two schools united in 1957 to form Yonsei University, which is one of the top three universities in South Korea, along with Seoul National University and Korea University.

One of the most interesting parts of the trip was simply being in Seoul, a city of

10 million people. No one knew who I was, except for Nancy and Natalie — and that was kind of nice.

Let me explain what I mean by that last comment. When I travel, I like to people watch (especially in airports). I like to think about the lives and stories of the different people I see. When I'm in an airport, I imagine where and why people are traveling. I think about their hopes, joys, sorrows, dreams, family histories, and so forth. I don't know them — they don't know me, but everyone has a story.

The experience was heightened by being in a different country. To our surprise, we saw very few foreigners in Seoul. When we stepped onto a subway car full of people, we were almost always the only Caucasian or "Western" people on the train. There were so many, many people going about their business on the subway cars and riding the buses and walking on the streets — going to and from work, to and from school, to and from shopping areas. We visited many traditional shopping areas with countless stalls offering numerous goods for sale. Sometimes it was almost a sensory overload!

I could go on and on, but my point is this — when I have this kind of experience, it is humbling and helpful. It is humbling and helpful, because it yanks me out of the little cocoon of a world that I tend to wrap myself in. I kind of liken it to a paraphrase of the previous quote from Psalm 8: "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! When I look at a huge sprawling city filled with millions of people, half-way around the world, what am I that you are mindful of me, that you care for me?"

I don't say that in a pessimistic or self-pitying way. On the contrary, I say it with a sense of awe and wonder, much as the psalmist says, "Praise the Lord, all you nations! Extol him, all you peoples! For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord!"

Every month I talk with my good friend, Larry Williams, a retired Baptist minister who lives in Louisburg. One month I drive to Louisburg, the next month I call Larry on the phone. Larry began the Pastor as Spiritual Guide program a number of years ago and was its director until he retired last year. As part of that program, we were encouraged to meet with a spiritual director on a regular basis. It has been a great blessing to meet with Larry regularly to pray together and to talk about how God is at work in my life and ministry.

On a regular basis, Larry will ask me the question that is on the signature line of my e-mails: "Where is God already at work in this situation?" Larry and I talked in Louisburg ten days ago. He wanted to hear about our trip to Seoul. After I shared a number of our experiences and stories, Larry asked me, "Phil, where was God already at work in that situation?" I could have named any number of experiences, but I had to talk about being in the midst of all of those people, halfway around the world, and thinking about how great God is.

On Tuesday, December 24, 1968, astronauts Bill Anders, Jim Lovell, and Frank Borman orbited the moon. In a live TV broadcast (the most watched at the time), the astronauts sent this message back to Earth:

"We are now approaching lunar sunrise, and for all the people back on Earth,

the crew of Apollo 8 has a message that we would like to send to you.

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, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness.

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 firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.

And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto 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 called he Seas; and God saw that it was good.

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.”

According to the United States Census Bureau, the current world population is approximately seven and one-quarter billion people. I can't possibly give you an accurate, up-to-the minute or even up-to-the-second estimate — the U.S. and World Population Clock on the U.S. Census Bureau's website moves too quickly! Let's just say the world's population is roughly seven billion people. Almost all of them don't know me — and I don't know almost all of them! But the scriptures teach us that all seven billion plus people on this Earth are created in God's image. That's a humbling thought that gives you a different perspective.

We serve a great God!

“Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.” (Psalm 67:3)

Let us pray: O God, our God, you are sovereign over all the earth and Lord of our lives. Help us to trust that you hold our world and its peoples and our very lives securely. You are the God to whom we have given our lives. You are the God who deserves our worship and praise and joyful obedience. Amen.