

The Big Picture?

Isaiah 55:6-9, Matt 6:7-13

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This image that you see on the screen is a photo taken of our planet from the astronauts onboard the Apollo 17 in 1972. I was about 1 year old. This was the first full view-of-earth photo taken by humans. Up until this photo was taken and widely distributed, we could only imagine what the full sphere of earth would look like from afar.

There's a story behind this photo. According to a PBS documentary that aired a few years ago titled the *Story behind the Earth's most famous photo* by Vincent Brown, it was due to the thinking and prompting of a guy named Steward Brand.

Steward Brand was a leading thinker and philosopher in the late 60's. One night he went up on his San Francisco apartment-house roof, and with the help of a mind-altering substance (it was the 60's, man!) claimed he had a vision of the curvature of the Earth. And as he came down from his house roof and from his LSD trip, he had a burning vision and passion to communicate that our planet that we'd been treating as infinite was actually quite finite—and fragile. And that we have to take care of it, to be good stewards of it. Ironically, his name was Steward.

But how would he communicate this vision? His answer was, we need a photo of the whole Earth. If people could have an actual photo image of the full earth just suspended in space, this would change everything. So he went to a print shop and had hundreds of campaign-style black and white buttons made up that said “why haven't we seen a photo of the whole earth yet? And sent a whole bunch of them to scientists at NASA, to politicians in DC, AND to politicians in the Soviet Union! He wasn't messing around!

And as a result of his campaign, it appears that NASA actually altered the trajectory of Apollo 17 in order to place the spacecraft in a position directly

between the sun and Earth to where the crew could capture a photo of a fully illuminated planet Earth. And that's the photo you see on the screen. Anyone know the name of this photo? That's right, it's "The Blue Marble"!

Did it have the effect that Steward Brand imagined? Well, there was an effect, alright. And the effects have been universally experienced enough that it has been given a name, the *Overview Effect*. The overview effect is the experience or idea or thought that if we pull back far enough from the earth to where we can see the entirety of our planet, we will instantly see it as a fragile and finite home, and be moved and inspired to create a new era of awareness and care and protection for it. We've recently heard the astronauts of the Artemis II talking about the deeply moving experience they had just by looking at the earth from space. One of them described how when he first saw the entirety of earth with his own eyes from outer space, he literally couldn't breathe. It was that powerful.

Ok, so the overview effect is powerful. But not all of us can just jump aboard a rocket ship and shoot off into space and look back at the whole earth for ourselves! But we do have all kinds of satellite images that we can pull up on our screens by typing a few words and a couple clicks of a mouse. Or our smartphones. I looked at google maps and I could only scroll out as far as North and South America. I tried Apple Maps, and discovered that you can actually scroll all the way out until you see the round sphere of earth, and you can even swipe and spin it like a basketball! We have a numbing amount of images, real photos or AI generated, at our fingertips today, to the point where we are hard pressed to be impacted by any of them in any lasting way. So the blue marble has lost its luster and overview effect it seems.

And if we *could* somehow all go into space and see earth from a distance with our own eyes, would it change the ways we think about the earth to the point where we would be inspired to actually change how we relate to it?

It's a beautiful image, this blue marble, and its overview effect did produce a lot of energy to create awareness of environmental issues and the "we're in this together" sentiment.

In reality though, the impact since The Blue Marble has been mixed at best in this regard. Even In the 80's when NASA learned how to combine the photo of the whole earth with data overlay to show the effects over time of the thinning atmosphere, the effect was stunning, for a while, and only for some.

So if considering the whole earth as finite and being inspired to care for it is not going to just happen instantly just by looking at a photo or live satellite image, at least not in a lasting and unifying way—and we can't all travel to space to see in person, then how are we to live our lives in relation to the earth in this moment of time as the changing of the planet becomes more evident? As followers of the life and example of God's son Jesus, how do we live on this earth that started out as a beautifully poetic masterpiece of God's gardening genius?

Let's take a look at the passage for today from Isaiah 55 that Matt read for us a while ago. "My plans are not your plans, nor are your ways my ways", says the LORD V8. And in verse 9 "Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my plans than your plans."

Maybe a good starting point as we consider how to live in relationship with this finite earth is to acknowledge that there's more going on here than we're going to be able to understand scientifically, at least from a western approach to science and ways of knowing.

And if there's more going on than we can understand and respond to from what science teaches us, then we're going to want to respond in ways that are greater than just advocating for and adopting new practices and laws that try to curb the effects of humans upon the planet.

What are “our plans” as humans? If one were to zoom in from that surreal focal point to where we can see humans, what would we see? We’d see people competing with each other for natural resources and power, extracting what they can from the land in order to establish or preserve prominence and affluence, while in other parts of the world we’d see others struggling to find enough food and shelter to stay alive. And we’d see people on the move displaced from war or hunger or unsafe living conditions migrating throughout the world in search of a place with enough provisions to make their new home. We’d see the affluent nations trying to keep them away from their borders and their resources out of fear that there won’t be enough for everyone—so we’ll just take care of ourselves.

And that is one of the problems with the Blue Marble image is that it erases people. And that’s a problem, because it removes the inequities that are inherent in the climate crisis.

Removing people from the picture obscures the fact that some communities face more significant challenges than others. Often this is connected to where people live. Think Flint Michigan. Think communities in Appalachia built in low lying areas prone to flooding. Or the recent tragedy in Nepal.

If we think of our earth from a zoomed out perspective to where people and the imbalance of wealth and power become invisible, one has to wonder if how we relate to our planet will actually change.

With this distant view, our conversations about how to care for the planet dissolve into political arguments about emissions, transportation, fossil fuels vs renewable sources of energy and we even dehumanize each other with people taking strong sides and villainizing the other as “the problem” for not relating to the earth like we claim to do.

Take emissions, for example. In my former career I was a part of, and witnessed many passionate conversations about how annoying and frustrating it is that there is so much emissions-related apparatus on farm

machinery. And I can understand this frustration when farmers are already dealing with drought and low commodity prices, and the cost of farm equipment has skyrocketed in the last 20 years for lots of reasons, one of those reasons being the cost of the additional emissions-related tier 4 technology that manufacturers are mandated to include. That gets tacked on to the cost of the equipment. And then of course, this smoke reducing apparatus has to be maintained. And if it isn't, like if a sensor fails or a wire gets rubbed or melted, pretty soon the engine system software will derate the power of the engine to the point where the engine won't go above idle.

And that's when I would often get sent to the field (for those of you that don't know, I was a John Deere technician that specialized in combine harvesters). And I would have to connect a laptop with John Deere software to diagnose the problem, and then clear the latched emissions code. All this while the customer would rather be harvesting and bringing in a few dollars, rather than spending lots of dollars on a repair bill for the emissions system that he may not have wanted to start with! Inevitably while I was working, I would get a question or 2 about what I think about deleting the entire emissions system. Of course the JD dealership I worked for was forbidden to do any such thing. The "I know a guy" conversation usually followed.

How dare the government regulate how much smoke my combine or tractor or trucks or diesel pickup is allowed to spit out! Or someone might say just as passionately, "our planet is in distress, and you people aren't going to care about it enough to change, and if it takes government regulation to change things then so be it!" See, now the problem becomes political opponents who are bringing about this hardship—rather than a mutual grappling with how we relate to this blue marble that we find ourselves upon. If we humans can't even see the humanity in each other, do we even stand a chance of finding holistic ways to relate to the earth that keeps alive the beautiful garden metaphor of the creation story?

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways" God says through the prophet Isaiah. Yes, yes they sure are.

Maybe Jesus' words that have been selected to go along with today's theme of returning to God's garden will provide some additional guidance. In these particular words of Jesus, as he sat on the mountainside talking to all who had gathered, he's giving guidance about prayer. Talking and listening to God. That seems like maybe a good thing to do when we're in over our heads, right?

He's been cautioning his listeners about religion for show, and prayer for the sake of making an impression on others. And then, he says, "don't get caught up in praying long drawn out prayers thinking this is what it takes to get God's attention. God already knows what is needed. God is not just looking at the blue marble, God is zoomed way in, even to the cares you have upon your hearts. You already have God's attention. You don't need fancy prayer strategy or technique in order to get God to listen!

Here's how you SHOULD pray.

"God, Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us the bread we need for today. Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you and others. Likewise give us forgiveness for those who have wronged us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil."

At first glance it seems not very relevant to this "returning to the garden" theme for today. Oh, but let's look closer.

When we limit our sight to our individual human interests, we lose our way. When we ask God to provide for us each day from this holy yet finite garden—just enough for each new day, we begin to gain God's perspective. We are given eyes to see where we have wronged God, our fellow humans, and maybe even God's natural world around us. And when we are quick to forgive those who have wronged us, and find deliverance from the evil that convinces us that we must hold tightly to earthly provisions. And now, we are perhaps in a much better position to work together, scientifically, experientially, prayerfully to find a path forward that sees the blue marble in its finite entirety, but also sees and reaches out and restores dignity to our neighbor who is struggling.

In order to really see the big picture, we have to see the small picture. And God, the master gardener, has the ability to do that perfectly.

Perhaps this is how we find our way—daily seeking God and God's perspective of our common home. We don't need any mind-altering substances to tap into the timeless and limitless heart of God that sees the big picture and the small picture perfectly all at the same time.

The invitation is to prayerfully, and with humility, join the Master Gardener in growing the sort of world where every single created person and creature, no matter if they are big or little, no matter where they live on this beautiful blue marble, has what they need to grow and thrive.

And maybe, just maybe, God's plan for this blue marble that is God's garden will be restored—one kind and loving gesture at a time. As you distribute food at New Life Church this week. As you prepare or serve at the Safe Hope Shelter. As you smile and nod to the person filling up gas on the other side of the gas island. As you listen with humility for the humanity in the person who has opinions on lots of things that differ from your own. As you experiment with new, more sustainable farming practices. And as you pray, asking for God's daily provisions, and for the mind of the master Gardener.

Will you become a gardener?

[The Story Behind Earth's Most Famous Photo | The Bigger Picture with Vincent Brown | PBS](#)