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A View from Above



"When astronauts venture aboard the International Space Station [ISS], they see a world without borders. They work together while orbiting Earth, and no boundaries are visible between them, even as member countries contend with geopolitics on the planet below."

That's the opening paragraph of CNN's report on the arrival at the ISS of the new crew that lifted off

from Kennedy Space Center in Florida on October 5 aboard a SpaceX Crew Dragon spacecraft.

That team, dubbed "Crew-5" by Space X, lives up to the "international" word in the ISS name. It includes NASA astronauts Nicole Mann and Josh Cassada, astronaut Koichi Wakata of the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency, and cosmonaut Anna Kikina of Roscosmos, who is the first Russian to travel on a SpaceX spaceflight.

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"We live in the same world, we live in the same universe," Cassada said, emphasizing their common ground as citizens of Earth. "Sometimes we experience it in a very different way from our neighbors. We can all keep that in mind ... and continue to do amazing things. And do it together."

Nicole Aunapu Mann, a registered member of the Wailacki tribe of the Round Valley reservation in California, is the first Native American woman to go to space as well as the first woman to serve as mission commander for a SpaceX mission.

Among the ISS Crew-4 that will depart aboard the Dragon spacecraft that delivered Crew-5 to the station is Jessica Watkins, the first African-American female to have spent a long mission in the ISS. Crew-4 was slated to depart ISS on board the Dragon on October 13.

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If those living and working at ISS can look at Earth and see a world without borders, actor William Shatner, who flew into space with three others aboard a Blue Origin suborbital capsule almost exactly a year before the Crew-5 flight, had a different impression. He'd been invited to the flight by Blue Origin's creator, the entrepreneur and Star Trek fan Jeff Bezos. At the age of 90, Shatner became the oldest person to fly in space.

Minutes after his flight, Shatner described experiencing the overview effect, a shift in thinking and feelings reported by some astronauts while viewing Earth from space. The most prominent common aspects of the effect are appreciation and perception of beauty, unexpected and even overwhelming emotion, and an increased sense of connection to other people and the Earth as a whole. Some astronauts have said the overview effect can change the observer's self concept and value system, and can be transformative. For Shatner, the effect was a deepened understanding that the ecosphere of the Earth is but a thin, fragile skin enveloping its planet.

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The actor, known for portraying Captain Kirk in Star Trek, elaborated on the effect of looking away from Earth into space in his recently released book, *Boldly Go: Reflections on a Life of Awe and Wonder*.

"I love the mystery of the universe," he wrote. "All of that has thrilled me for years ...but when I looked in the opposite direction, into space, there was no mystery, no majestic awe to behold ... all I saw was death."

The now 91-year-old described seeing a "cold, dark, black emptiness" unlike anything on Earth.

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"My trip to space was supposed to be a celebration; instead, it felt like a funeral," he wrote. "It was among the strongest feelings of grief I have ever encountered. The contrast between the vicious coldness of space and the warm nurturing of Earth below filled me with overwhelming sadness."

"Everything I had thought was wrong. Everything I had expected to see was wrong," he wrote. "I had a different experience, because I discovered that the beauty isn't out there, it's down here, with all of us. Leaving that behind made my connection to our tiny planet even more profound."

After returning from the flight, he told Bezos, "What you have given me is the most profound experience ... I hope I never recover from this." END.



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Warming Up:

Have you ever had an experience that dramatically changed your outlook or understanding of your place in the world or the cosmos even?

If so, what changed, and what lasting effect, if any, did it have?



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Read Revelation 7:9-17

In this reading, we see John's vision of a rescued humanity worshiping around God's throne.

Questions:

What is it that unites the multitude?

What are things that differentiate people within the multitude?

How or to what extent are each important?

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Read Psalm 8

The Psalmist looks at the earth seemingly from a similar perspective to that of William Shatner, yet the Psalmist writes this hymn of glory and Shatner “grieves for the earth”.

Questions: To what extent are both the Psalmist and Shatner’s responses to looking at the earth appropriate?

How are we to look at the earth (people, animals, physical features) as Christians?

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Read Psalm 19

The Psalmist here compares the handiwork of God in making the earth to God's handiwork in creating and giving us His Law, the perfect expression of how the world works.

Question:

How does God's creation give testimony or evidence to its Creator?

How does God's Law give testimony or evidence of its Creator?

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Read Colossians 1:15-20

Note the number of times the phrase “all things” is used.

Question:

What does the "all things" assertion mean to you?

What might "thrones or dominions or rulers or powers" represent for us today?

What does it mean that in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell?

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Wrapping It Up

A few quotes to wrap up our discussion. Compare and contrast

- Michael Collins (Apollo 11; 1969) said that "the thing that really surprised me was that [Earth] projected an air of fragility. And why, I don't know. I don't know to this day. I had a feeling it's tiny, it's shiny, it's beautiful, it's home, and it's fragile."
- Edgar Mitchell (Apollo 14; 1971) described it as an "explosion of awareness" and an "overwhelming sense of oneness and connectedness ... accompanied by an ecstasy ... an epiphany."
- Anne McCain (Expedition 58/59 to the ISS, 2018-2019). "I really, truly wish everybody could see Earth from space," ... they may feel that sense not only of the enormity of our universe and our planet "but also the fragility, how we're all in this together."
- William Shatner (Blue Origin NS-18; 2021) said that "all of a sudden, as though you whip a sheet off you when you're asleep, and you're looking into blackness, into black ugliness. And you look down. There's the blue down there and the black up there. And there is mother Earth and comfort. And up there ... Is that death? I don't know."