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50TH ANNIVERSARY OF MOON LANDING

Most years have at least a little going for them, but 1968 was awful from the start. It was the beginning of the Vietnam War that cost thousands of lives on both sides; Martin Luther King was assassinated followed by Senator Bobby Kennedy's murder.

And then, at the end of the year, there was poetry. The crew of Apollo 8 had rocketed away from the mess at home and ventured out to the moon, becoming the first human beings to reach and orbit our closest celestial being, the Moon.

They arrived, as history would have it, on Christmas Eve. During the eighth of their ten orbits, they pointed a TV camera out of one of their five windows and showed a global audience of one billion – nearly one of every three people alive – the otherworldly sight of the lunar surface.

For the fiftieth anniversary of their mission, all three astronauts met at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, where their spacecraft is on display.

As with so much about the early space program, part of what drove the decision to fly Apollo 8 was geopolitics. The U.S. and the Soviet Union had been in a footrace to the moon since cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human being in space in 1961. In the summer of 1968, word began shooting across the intelligence web that the Soviets were going to beat the Americans again.

The American project was going to be an Earth-orbital test of the lunar module. Instead word got out that the Russians were going to put a man or men around the moon by the end of 1968.

So the decision was made that Apollo 8 should get there first, giving the crew and ground team just 16 weeks to figure out how to do it. Nobody had any illusions about how risky a plan that was. Just the year before, the Apollo spacecraft had killed three astronauts in a launch pad fire before it had even made its first flight. But the crew did go into orbit and they did come home, and in the process they gave the world yet another gift: the celebrated photograph that came to be known as 'Earthrise'. It illustrated, as nothing else had, the fragility of our planet, and is widely credited with helping to kick-start the environmental movement.

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