

Bless the Lord

Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c

Who is this God that we bless and praise?

Due largely to genuinely great art, like Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, we Christians have often figured that God looked like a really old guy. This image of an old guy fits with notions of wisdom and of power, and with personal images of good grandfathers that we cast on God as our divine grandpa. Such an image of a wise elder is also based on biblical images such as the "ancient of days" in Daniel 7. Yet all of these images—wise, powerful old guy, divine grandpa, or "ancient of days"—are incomplete.

James Weldon Johnson, in his poem "The Creation," described God like this:

And God stepped out on space,
And he looked around and said:
I'm lonely--
I'll make me a world.

And far as the eye of God could see
Darkness covered everything,
Blacker than a hundred midnights
Down in a cypress swamp.

Then God smiled,
And the light broke,
And the darkness rolled up on one side,
And the light stood shining on the other,

And God said: That's good!

Our understanding at its best has known that God is beyond anything we can ask or imagine—and certainly beyond our images.

Psalm 104 gives us some visual imagery for God that is even more arresting than Michelangelo's and our attempts to visualize God using human characteristics and experiences. God's clothes: light, majesty, honor. God's world: stretched out as easily as we do a tent. God's transportation: chariot, with the "wings of the wind" as charioteers. God's creation: an earth that shall never be moved. Not even Michelangelo took this image on in artwork, because, well, it would be impossible. How do you draw those horses that are really winds again? The psalm's image functions to divest us of images. It is as though the psalmist were saying: "Imagine something more unimaginable than you have ever imagined. You cannot? Good, you are starting to get it." As Augustine said, "If you understand it, it is not God."

Johnson said further:

Then God reached out and took the light in his hands,
And God rolled the light around in his hands
Until he made the sun;
And he set that sun a-blazing in the heavens.
And the light that was left from making the sun
God gathered it up in a shining ball
And flung it against the darkness,
Spangling the night with the moon and stars.
Then down between
The darkness and the light
He hurled the world;

And God said: That's good!

Psalm 104 does more than give us visual aid. It recounts the saving works of God in history: especially Noah's flood. "The waters stood above the mountains. At your rebuke they flee.... You set a boundary that they may not pass" (vv. 6-9). For those us who paid attention Sunday school we immediately remember: God wiped out the whole earth for its wickedness—except for Noah and his family, and male and female of each of the animals. There was a fresh start after that—and a promise: God would not drown us all again. Not that God would not wipe us out again exactly—but that the method would not be water. As my sister Sharon like to sing from the old spiritual: "Not by the water but the fire next time." the old spiritual sings. Reminding us that the God who cares passionately about us also cares about holiness.

Then God himself stepped down--
And the sun was on his right hand,
And the moon was on his left;
The stars were clustered about his head,
And the earth was under his feet.
And God walked, and where he trod
His footsteps hollowed the valleys out
And bulged the mountains up.

Then he stopped and looked and saw
That the earth was hot and barren.
So God stepped over to the edge of the world
And he spat out the seven seas--

He batted his eyes, and the lightnings flashed--
He clapped his hands, and the thunders rolled--
And the waters above the earth came down,
The cooling waters came down.

Then the green grass sprouted,
And the little red flowers blossomed,
The pine tree pointed his finger to the sky,
And the oak spread out his arms,
The lakes cuddled down in the hollows of the ground,
And the rivers ran down to the sea;
And God smiled again,
And the rainbow appeared,
And curled itself around his shoulder.

Then God raised his arm and he waved his hand
Over the sea and over the land,
And he said: Bring forth! Bring forth!
And quicker than God could drop his hand,
Fishes and fowls
And beasts and birds
Swam the rivers and the seas,
Roamed the forests and the woods,
And split the air with their wings.
And God said: That's good!

The first image Christians have of this God is of Jesus, taking on all of our ugliness to give us all God's beauty—not distantly, as a nice idea, but concretely, as tangibly as the person sitting next to you. Think of holiness that radiates from a person even if he or she is not lovely by the world's standards. Surely Mother Teresa was more lovely than any fashion model, your beloved youth Sunday school teacher (or grandfather) than any movie star. That beauty is a gift of God, offered to you and me also. God is incarnate now among God's people. God's beauty is in the people God is making holy. *That* is God's garment of light. **Jason Byassee**

This is the God the psalmist reminds us to bless and praise. We join with all creation to bless the Lord. O Lord my God, you are very great; and we bless you. You are clothed with honor and majesty, we bless you O Lord.

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