

CREATOR POWER

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Genesis 2:4b-9 - The day God made the earth and the heavens

Isaiah 40:25-31 - Our Creator empowers us

John 1:1-5 - All things came into being through him

The Creation

James Weldon Johnson

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!

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 up in a shining ball
And flung 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!

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!

Then God walked around,
And God looked around
On all that He had made.
He looked on His world
With all its living things
And God said: I'm lonely still.

Then God sat down--
On the side of a hill where He could think;
By a deep, wide river He sat down;
With His head in His hands,
God thought and thought,
Till He thought: I'll make me a man!

Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled Him down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand,
This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till He shaped it in His own image;

Then into it He blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.
Amen. Amen.

I want to say a little bit about James Weldon Johnson in order to give some sense of the history behind "The Creation" just read by Hazel Naslund, and behind the collection entitled "God's Trombones" from which that poem comes and which is really one of the most important pieces of American literature in the twentieth century. I thought I would do a little research on the internet, and it was really quite a joy to discover hundreds of pages of material about Johnson, his poetry, and his life work. Here is a brief summary of who he was. He was born in 1871 in Jacksonville, Florida, and over the course of his 67 years he was the first African American admitted to the Florida bar since the end of Reconstruction; he was co-composer with his brother John Rosamond of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the song that would later become known as the Negro national anthem; he was Field Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; he was a journalist, publisher, diplomat, educator, translator, librettist, anthologist and English professor; he was a well-known poet and novelist; and was one of the prime movers of the Harlem Renaissance which was a movement in New York in the 1920s. What his life was really about was the advancement of coloured people. If you think back into the 1920s and 1930s, long before the freedom movements of the 1960s and so on, what a powerful vision it must have been that motivated the work of a man like Johnson to work for the dignity and the equality of the Negro people in the United States of America.

To give you a bit of an idea of the contribution that he made in poetry particularly, consider that until then Black poets mostly wrote in dialect, and you may have read some

of it. That poetry is actually quite hard to read because it has many colloquialisms, malapropisms and that sort of thing. It's easy to listen to but it is hard to read in the way it is written. Nevertheless, it captures the dialect of that sort of southern Black culture. Johnson was one of the first, and controversial at that, to write a kind of poetry that reflected or came out of the Black experience but was not written in dialect. The language he uses, as you heard in this particular poem, certainly has an element of the vernacular--enough to capture the sense of the southern Negro experience--but it's not in that "Jim Crow" kind of dialect. Black people would therefore experience in Johnson's poetry a kind of emancipation from the limitations of Black culture, an emancipation accompanied by an affirmation of who they were when they heard expressions like "blacker than a hundred nights down in the Cyprus swamp." And so what Johnson did was to lay some of the most important foundations for the emancipation movement for the Negro people in the U.S. that would continue to build for decades to come. And, of course, today we see the amazing results of that in so many people in the Black community who have taken a place of dignity and made profound contributions to our culture.

"The Creation" is perhaps the best known of Johnson's poems. And when I think about what he has done in this poem, the poem has meaning within the context of the Black people. And yet, or perhaps thereby, it helps me to understand more fully my own faith, and particularly the part of my faith that is the marvellous affirmation of our God as Creator which translates into a marvellous affirmation of us, of myself as a creature of God, a beloved product of that loving work of creation. The experience of the Black people is one of unspeakable oppression and brutality and indignity. In order for people to really enslave another human being, they must at some level have stopped believing that the other human being is also a beloved creature of God. And so Johnson had the profound spiritual insight that at the very root of what the Black people needed in order to give them the courage to go on decade after decade believing, hoping in their own freedom and liberation, was to believe in their hearts that they too were children of God, beloved creatures of a loving Creator. And this poem so profoundly gives that sense of God as the Creator of the Black people, as well as the Creator of the rest of the human family and the whole world itself. It gives us a reminder that in our lives we, too, need to reaffirm our creaturehood, our sense of being beloved creatures of God.

That's why I chose the Isaiah reading. It talks about God as Creator, or through Isaiah's mouthpiece, God talks about himself as a Creator but then goes on to say "I've created the heavens and the earth and I will empower you, I will strengthen you. The ones who wait upon the Lord will rise up on wings like eagles, run and not be weary." The issue for people who are enslaved is their disempowerment. Oh, there are many kinds of disempowerment in our lives in places where we feel we don't have the strength, we don't have the right, we don't have the privilege, we don't have any hope, we don't have the courage, to do what is set before us and what we may even feel in the depths of our hearts is our destiny. So Isaiah connects that empowerment to creation. It's the Creator who empowers us for living.

And Johnson realized that what is needed to empower people is to reconnect them to the story of creation so that they know, contrary to the message they receive from their White slave owners, that they too are beloved creatures of God. The bit that I just read

alluded to a song that he co-wrote with his brother called “Lift Every Voice and Sing” which was, as I mentioned earlier, adopted as the Negro national anthem by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. So it’s a song that has profoundly inspired people throughout all of those decades. It was also featured in a series, produced by national public radio in 2002, about artistic icons of American culture, and I thought it was very significant that the title of that particular series was “Present at the Creation.” I didn’t discover that title until after I had prepared today’s bulletin; if I had, it would have been the title of this sermon--a far better title even than the one I chose. “Present at the Creation.” What more powerful affirmation is there for any group, for any people, for any nation, for any individual? Here are a few of the words from “Lift Every Voice and Sing”:

*God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way,
Thou who hast by Thy might, led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.*

Praise be to our Creator.

And so, in that spirit, we turn to a hymn that celebrates the wonders of God’s creation. Sing it from the perspective of the one who sees the creation all around, whether it be Black people or White people or whoever it is of the whole human family. To see the beauty and the wonders of creation is to feel those loving arms of God wrapped around us, holding us, carrying us, and to know that that love is there shining for everyone throughout the entire world. “This is God’s Wondrous World.”

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor