

“Finding God in the Waves: Spirituality and Our Brains”
Psalm 104:1-5

Sometimes comic strips give us deep truths through short and funny statements. This one is certainly one of those with Hobbes saying to Calvin: “What a clear night! Look at all the stars. Millions of them!” Calvin responds: “Yes, we’re just tiny specks, on a planet particle, hurling through the infinite blackness. Then after a few moments of looking at the stars, Calvin says, “Let’s go in and turn on all the lights.”

Comic strip: https://i0.wp.com/www.timothypauljones.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/img_0429-1.png

This reminds me of the words of poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning who wrote:
“Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God:
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries
. . . unaware.”

Awe is a very important part of expanding our human experience. It also helps us expand our brains. In his book, *Finding God in the Waves*, Mike McHargue talks about his experiences of awe and how they brought him back to faith, while still having doubts about God. Based on scientific research of the brain, McHargue asserts that, “people’s beliefs about God aren’t anything like a ‘spot’ but instead arise from a complex network in our brains. The more someone thinks about God, prays, or has other spiritual experiences, the more developed this network becomes.”

Awe could also be part of what expands our vision and understanding of God. McHargue sees that awe is part of an understanding of God that is loving. Unfortunately, as human beings we are prone to the temptation of projecting a fearful image of anger on God. This is what McHargue calls, “the Angry God.” This is the experience of God as angry and is “highly associated with activity in the amygdala. You have more stress, and you anger more easily. It becomes difficult for you to forgive yourself or others, and you become fearful or angry toward those who don’t think, look, or act like you...Unfortunately, the Angry God is ripe for exploitation. When life’s meaning or one’s eternal destiny is closely associated with such a God, it’s easy for authoritarian systems –whether churches, governments, or even terrorist organizations – to drive people to dangerous behaviors.”

That is why it is important to pay attention to our image of God and how we intentionally allow love and awe to shape our image of God. McHargue argues that “The Loving God affects the brain in ways that are remarkably different from the Angry God. People who focus on God’s love develop thicker, richer gray matter in their prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex. This development offers them better focus, concentration, compassion, and empathy. They have lower stress levels and lower blood pressure, and it’s easier for them to forgive themselves and others...they develop a characteristic asymmetry in the activity of their thalamus. When that happens, God’s love becomes implanted in their sense of identity, and they begin to see the world as being basically

safe...I find this neuroscience comforting...it helps me understand what causes faith to either go wrong or become a positive force in society.”

So how does one avoid falling prey to the Angry God image/model which only reinforces itself in our brains once it takes hold? The good news of our faith is that awe can help move us beyond our fears to be embraced by the mystery of God. Only deep experiences of God’s love can help free us from fear, judgment, and anger.

So today we turn to Psalm 104 for this kind of inspiration about God’s expansive love. Praising God for the beauty of God’s creation is one of the best ways to get us out of our limited views of life and out of our fears. Psalm 104 is a great reminder of the importance of God's creation for our wellbeing. It is an amazing poem about God as the creator and sustainer of the universe. This was the common understanding of the Israelites and also of the other cultures around them. The psalmist knew about the intricate interconnectedness and subtle interdependence of air, soil, water, plants, and animals, including humans.

The psalmist knew the truth revealed in the connection between the Hebrew word for "humanity" (da Adam) and the word for "ground" (adamâ): Human beings really are creatures of the earth. The origin and destiny of humankind is closely connected to the origin and destiny of the earth. The same truth is revealed in the connection between the English word human and the Latin word humus, "soil." Science reveals to us some of the mathematical formulas that govern our universe and how connected life really is. Faith helps us to be in awe and to remember the importance of that connection. Awe is about letting God’s love and creativity as shown in creation to connect us to our divine essence. Psalm 104 invites us to a deeper level of connection to God's creation. This is not only about our selfish concern for our survival, but it is because of our love for God that we would see God's creation as sacred. It is about seeing the sacred in God's handiwork. For the psalmist, relating to the world begins with praising God. The psalmist is in awe and invites others to do the same. The motivation is not fear but rejoicing in the Lord (vv. 33-34). Praise involves the acknowledgment of God's presence and love for all living things. Taking the psalmist as an example, we would have to conclude that healing the fear in our brains begins with beholding the loving divine energy that pulses in all of creation. Here is a video about awe and how it can heal our brains: <https://youtu.be/hljk-9hOOIY>

Psalm 104 affirms that God has made every arrangement and provision for the life of the world. Our call to experience this sacredness. Practice random acts of awe! Get out in nature, breathe deeply, embrace the beauty of humanity.

Bless the Radiant One, O my soul!
O Heart of my heart, You are
so very great!
You are clothed with justice and
mercy,

arrayed in Light as your
fine attire.
You stretch over the heavens
like a tent,
your Radiance covering the waters;
You shine through the clouds, and
ride on the wings of the wind;
The wind, like the Breath of Life,
carries your Word,
Fire refines the dross of
our souls.
You set the earth on its foundations,
strong and secure.

You covered it with the deep
like a garment,
with many waters that life might come forth.
At your Word, the waters divided,
becoming rivers and lakes and mighty oceans;
storms came to ensure the balance and
to renew the earth.
The mountains rose, the valleys became low
in the places that You did appoint.

You brought harmony to all the earth,
that life might spring forth
in abundance.
You created springs to flow into the
valleys;
they flow between the hills.
Giving drink to every creature of the field,
quenching their thirst as your
Living Water quenches ours.
With the air, You have given birds
their habitation;
they sing among the branches.
The majesty of Creation is seen
throughout the land,
the sounds of Creation mingle
with the music of the spheres.

Through your Word, grass came forth
for the cattle,
and plants for us to cultivate,
That we might have food from the earth,
and wine, the fruit of the vine,

Oil and healing herbs of many varieties,
and bread, our daily sustenance.
The tress are watered abundantly and
with the sun,
provide the air we breathe.
Every living creature has its home:
the birds nest in trees, the wild
goats upon the mountaintop;
even the rocks provide protection.

You created the moon to mark the
tides and seasons,
the sun, that rises and sets
in beauty.
In darkness, when night comes,
the creatures of the forest
roam the earth.
They eat their fill, each according
to their need;
You provide their food.
When the sun rises, they disappear
from sight
and lie sown in their dens.

As your people go forth to their work,
You are there to guide them.
O You, who know all hearts, how
manifold are your works!
In wisdom You have created
them all;
the earth is filled with your creatures.
We took to the seas, great and wide,
which teem with life innumerable,
helping to maintain the balance.
O, that we might receive your gifts,
taking only what is needed
with grateful hearts.
All of creation looks to You,
to give them food in
due season.

When we are in harmony with
You,
the earth provides;
yes, a bountiful harvest to be shared with all.
When we misuse what You have created for us,

we blame You for the famine and
destruction that ensues,
and feel alienated from You.
Even so, You continue to send forth
your Spirit, and
the earth, though not without turmoil,
is renewed.

The glory of the Radiant One endures forever, for
the works of Love are sure.

You are ever-present to us, even as
the earth trembles,
even as the mountains spew forth
ashes and smoke!

I will abandon myself into your hands
as long as I live;

I will sing praise to You
while I have breath.

May my meditations be pleasing to You,
for I rejoice and am glad in You.

May all who feel separated from You
open their hearts to new Life!

Praise the Creator of the Universe!

Bless the Heart of my heart,

O my soul!

Amen.