

Mirrors of God's Glory

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Genesis 1:1-2:3

Colossians 1:3-20

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness....”

“Now the last leaves are down,” writes poet Jane Kenyon, “except for the thick dark leaves of the oak and ghostly beech leaves that click in the breeze, and we’re reduced to a subtler show of color—brown, gray, and buff, perhaps a little purple in the distance, and the black-green of moss, hemlock, and fir. To my eye these hues are more beautiful than the garish early autumn with its orange leaves—orange, the color of madness—and leaves the color of blood. Let hot life retire, grow still: November’s colors are those of the soul.”

In his commentary on the first of Genesis, John Calvin as much as exclaims that God has designed the world to be a theater of God’s glory and made us to be privileged spectators of God’s works. In fact, says Calvin, God “did not create Adam until he had enriched the world with [the] full abundance of good things.” Think of that. God did not make human beings until the world was completely charged with God’s grandeur, flaming out, like shining from shook foil [and] gathered to a greatness, ready for us to behold. Put more scientifically: if 13.7 billion years ago, as the latest theories contend, the Lord God Almighty called the things-that-are out of chaos, sent light into utter darkness, flung stars and planets across the vast nothingness of uncreated space; and if some 4.5 billion years ago, on this one inconsequential speck of matter, the God of heaven and earth began to separate the waters from the dry land, call forth flora and fauna (the thick dark leaves of the oak and ghostly beech leaves that click in the breeze), set lights in the dome of the sky for signs and for seasons, for days and years, created swarms of living creatures to fly and swim and crawl upon the earth; and if some 120,000 years ago the Word spoken in the beginning spoke again, one way or another, saying, “Let us create Homo Sapiens in our image,” God spent almost 14 billion years readying the cosmos for us to behold. Seven days pales in comparison. This will never cease to astonish me, to humble me, to chasten me!

The extravagance of creation astonished Calvin as well and caused him to ask, in the first place, “What kind of God is it that fashioned the world?” Surely such a God was not the remote, terrible and inexorable God of Calvinism! Rather for Calvin, the God who has given us the world and everything in it is also the God from whom all blessings flow, the God who continues to lavish the likes of us with good things. God is the kind of God, writes Calvin in the first chapters of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, “who sustains this world, *governs* it by his wisdom, *preserves* it by his goodness, . . . *rules* the human race by his justice and judgment, *supports* it in his mercy, *looks after* it with his protection. . . .” Notice the verbs: sustains, governs, preserves, rules, supports, looks after. They are the providing actions, the providential care of the God whose love is never exhausted. “He names himself our father . . . and takes away all our mistrust by the utter winsomeness of his name” . . . “he expresses amazing warmth of love and most tender affection. For he compares himself to a mother whose love . . . has no parallel. . . .”

What kind of God is it that fashioned the world? God is a bountiful parent whose goodness and care will surely overwhelm us as we walk in the crisp November air, before dinner next Thursday, to behold the dark leaves of the oak and ghostly beech leaves that click in the breeze, to feel the black green moss and smell the hemlock and fir: we were made to be spectators in the theater of God's glory! But when we gather together to ask the Lord's blessing on this Thursday next, when we take our seat at a table groaning under the weight of a turkey as well-stuffed as we soon will be, Calvin's second question will prove to be more difficult: What kind of human race corresponds to God the bountiful parent?

"The answer is obvious enough," writes Calvin scholar Brian Gerrish, "grateful sons and daughters. But [he says] we have to make a distinction." What we know of our human existence involves the human beings we were made to be and the human beings we have chosen to be (especially around the table with all our relatives!). This is not so of the rest of creation that have been precisely what they were created to be in relation to their Creator for those billions of years before we came on the scene: "...the little birds that sing, sing of God; the beasts call out for him; the elements fear him; the mountains echo him; the streams and fountains flash glances at him; and the grass and flowers laugh before him..." wrote Calvin [John Calvin wrote those words?], every creature without exception a mirror in which we are to contemplate the immense riches of God's glory. So again, in what special way are human beings designed to be mirrors of God's image, uniquely reflecting God's glory?

In the first place and in the first creation story, we are mirrors of God's image and distinguished from the mute creation by our "ability to reflect God's glory in a conscious response of thankfulness." In other words, my little Scottish terrier owes her existence to God and is charged with God's grandeur, but she does not consciously know it—or so our theological tradition teaches us! She begs to go outside so that she may sniff the smells, roll in the leaves, stalk the squirrels and thoroughly enjoy the theater of God's glory without being consciously aware that the smells, the leaves, the squirrels, that she herself reflects God's glory. Rather God has given her to me so that she, along with the thick dark leaves of the oak and ghostly beech leaves that click in the breeze, will call out of me the conscious response of thanksgiving: will make me be the *human* being God intended me to be.

But God knows you and I need more than the world we can see, taste, touch, smell and feel if we are going to be *human* beings. Not only were the things without created to call out of us thanksgiving; we also have been given the things within: the inner life of the mind and the heart, of reason and of the affections that makes us conscious of the mystery we will never dispel. "It is our nature not only to see/that the world is beautiful," writes poet Mary Oliver, "but to stand in the dark, under the stars,/or at noon, in the rainfall of light,/ frenzied,/wringing our hands,/half-mad, saying over and over:/ what does it mean, that the world is beautiful--/what does it mean?" We have, within, the mind and the heart, the reason and the affections which call out of us the conscious thankfulness that makes us *human* beings.

So too, there is the life of the other given to elicit the thanksgiving that is our *human being*, to alert us to God's blessings that come by another's hand and help. "...should we not be grateful to other people," asks the *Genevan Catechism* in the 237th place, "when they perform some service for us?" Answer: "Of course we should, precisely because God honors them by channeling through their hands the good things that flow to us from the inexhaustible fountain of [God's] generosity.... Anyone, therefore, who does not show gratitude to other people betrays ingratitude to God as well."

Most of the time, we do not. I do not. I remain mute, unconscious, as oblivious as a brute beast when I bound out of bed, gulp down my breakfast, rush to meet the day's obligations, forgetting all the while to taste, see, listen, feel only to fall exhausted into bed without so much as a nod to the extravagance without and within that has reflected God's glory to me, a thank you to the hand outstretched that has channeled God's goodness to me, a prayer to the God who has sustained, governed, preserved, ruled, supported, looked after me all the daylong and into the night.

This is the second creation story, human existence after the Fall: the life I choose rather than the life I was destined by God to live. This is human existence defined by thanklessness, the antithesis of God's goodness. East of Eden, God's curse meets us wherever we turn our eyes so that we cannot any longer surmise from created things that God is our loving Father. "We now sit," says Calvin, "like blind spectators in the theater of God's glory. We enjoy the gifts but ignore the giver." Calvin's harsh language concerning our total depravity issues from his disgust at our ingratitude and its consequences, not least of which is our ravaging of God's good creation as though it were ours to exploit and despoil and wreck.

What to do? A day once a year is not capable of redeeming God's image in us, God knows, and even if we should glimpse in the mirror of the other across the table, in the brisk walk through November's muted colors, in the slight bowing of the head before we dig in, even if we should glimpse God's glory, the moment is soon over. Blindness again overtakes us.

Yet the God who has loved us so extravagantly sees that neither the thick dark leaves of the oak and ghostly beech leaves that click in the breeze nor the fleeting consciousness of life's meaning within nor the hand opened and extended of the other without are sufficient to redeem us for the thanksgiving that makes us human.

For this failure, the God of the second creation story curses us with death. But God's judgment aside, I wonder if in the beginning God intended the brevity of life to be a sufficient impetus for our thankfulness, our wakeful awareness lest we miss a moment of our one precious life. I wonder if, in the first of Genesis the fact of our finitude might have found us thanking God for most this amazing day, and the next and the next: "(now the ears of my ears awake and now the eyes of my eyes are opened)"! But not, for in face of life's brevity, we are like Emily come back from the dead crying, "Wait! One more look. Good-bye. Good-bye world. Good-bye, Grover's Corners...Mama and Papa. Good-bye to clocks ticking...and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new ironed dresses and hot baths...and sleeping and waking up. Oh earth, you are too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?" "No" says the Stage Manager. "The saints and poets, maybe they do some."

Maybe some, but in fact there is only one. "The truth," concludes Calvin, "is that [the] God [who] has given himself [bountifully, extravagantly] from the beginning, now...gives himself again [in the fullness of time], to be beheld more clearly in the face of Jesus Christ." He who was in the beginning with God, the firstborn of all creation, is the mirror of God's glory, now born of Mary, now crucified dead and buried, who has redeemed our loss—not by one meal in November but finally at this table, this meal, this Eucharist, this thanksgiving feast that has no end. Here in bread broken and wine poured out we taste the love that, from the beginning, has given us everything, simply everything; here we rehearse our gratitude that will, in the end, be all our empty hands have to offer as we lie to die.

Remember this table as on Thursday next your eyes strain to see God's glory

reflected in the aunt who drinks too much and the father whose frailty confuses anger with anticipated grief, in the friend whose burdens you can no longer bear and the child whose prodigal life is too close to the secrets of your own, even as in them you see him and so see God's extravagant love mirrored in fleeting, precious, unrepeatable flesh that mirrors your fleeting, precious, unrepeatable life destined in love.

“Thanksgiving, with its reliable bounty, its reunions, its hours of perfumed air [will soon be] over,” Jane Kenyon writes a decade before her untimely death, “and the raking, the planting of bulbs, and the digging of root crops [will be] finished for the year. The freezer and the pantry shelves are as full as they are going to be: What we have done, we have done; what we have left undone, we have left undone.” What will remain as the shadows lengthen and the evening comes and the busy world is hushed and the fever of life is over and our work is done will be the gratitude for which we were made, offered at the last to the God from whom all blessings flow. Happy Thanksgiving! Amen.