

God and our imagination

by EARL F. PALMER

HOW DO WE IMAGINE GOD? Where are we to look for the most important evidences that show us who God is? And when our search is underway, how do we know that what we are finding in our journey is the truth and not the confusion of our own imagination projecting words and thoughts that we then wrongly call *God*?

In the story that C. S. Lewis wrote *The Horse and His Boy*, the lad Shasta meets up with the golden lion Aslan, the Son of the Emperor from beyond the sea. In the mist of a mountain trail he asks the large voice of Aslan this question as he tries to know who or what the voice is: "Are you a giant?" Aslan answers: "You may call me a giant but I am not like the creatures you call giants."

The truth is that all words we use to describe what we are thinking about when we think about God are words from our experiences or the experiences of others and none of these is able to contain the mystery of who God is. Nevertheless God allows our words without rebuke though God is beyond all words like *giant* or *mother* or *father*, or the pronouns *he* or *she* or any other words of greatness.

In the Book of Exodus, Moses is "encountered" by the living God at the burning bush and is given a vast task to do (Exodus 3). Moses asks who God is to validate the mandate given to him in favor of the captive people of Israel: *Who shall I say sent me?*

God speaks to Moses the words that will become for the people of the Bible the most important single name for God: *I am who I am, I will be who I will be*. What does this mean? It means that God speaks for himself and makes himself known.

Do we want to know who God is? Then we must listen to God speaking for himself. The greatest speech of all is more radical than the voice at the burning bush; it is that event in human history when *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth* (John 1).

Jesus Christ is the eternal and living speech of God, and in him we discover more than the name of God. We discover the very character of God. It happens as we watch and listen to the teacher Jesus Christ. What Jesus says and what Jesus does show us who God is.

As remarkable and impressive as our grandest thoughts are, even a word like *giant*, they are still not ultimate because God speaks for himself in his Son Jesus Christ. The Old Testament, by anticipation, prepares us with Messianic hopes — in the history, good and bad, of an ancient people; in the law, the prophets, and the songs too. The New Testament, by witness and narratives of events and letters between believers, points to the Jesus

Christ of history who is God's self-fulfillment. The Holy Spirit confirms that living speech to us today.

If the warning to us is clear that we must not create a false god from the celebration of some part of the whole of our life or as the highest affirmation of our life experiences, then also the promise is clear, too. We do not need to discover a new name for God as if God were hiding until some spiritual movement in our century discovers the "hidden" God, and would then set God free from an older cultural captiv-

ity of language.

God, who has never been captive to our language or our experience, is the one who finds us just as the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son was quite able to find both sons and quite able to grant the grace of celebration to each. We, as the sons and daughters, are the ones who need to be set free; not the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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