



"Rarely do we take time to think about and explore the rhetoric and imagery for "God" in Scripture and lectionary texts." (Unsplash/Davide Cantelli)



by Carol J. Dempsey

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Rarely do we take time to think about and explore the rhetoric and imagery for "God" in Scripture and lectionary texts. We merely pray with texts, listen to texts, preach on texts, set texts to music and even teach texts. Little do we realize that the rhetoric and imagery for the divine is deeply embedded in our religious culture, affects our religious consciousness and imagination, and even influences our politics, policies, how we live our lives and how we view life.

First Sunday of Advent

[November 29, 2020](#)

Isiah 63:16b-17, 19b, 64:2-7

Psalm 80

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:33-37

New Testament scholar and scholar of Christian spirituality, Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra M. Schneiders once said that the question for the 21st century is the "God question" — how do we understand the divine, what is our encounter with the divine, how do we embody the divine? Biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza challenges people to deconstruct and decolonize all the rhetoric associated with the divine — all our "God" talk — because language produces meaning and affects and constructs reality.

For many people today, the sense of the divine flows from what they have been taught about "God," what they have read in the Bible and what they have learned from reading books, treatises and church documents about God. Only some are grounded in the actual encounter with the divine who is simultaneously wholly "other" yet engaged fully in creation and the drama of human life. This Sunday's readings offer us an opportunity to examine the rhetoric and imagery associated with the divine.

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In the readings from Isaiah, Psalm 80, First Corinthians and the Gospel of Mark, the divine is called "Lord," "father," "redeemer" and "Lord of hosts" and depicted as a "person" capable of controlling human behavior and doing awesome deeds, who has the ability to harden hearts, who possesses a face that can hide itself from humans, who has hands that shapes human life and brings it into being, who can be close to people and yet distant, and who even has emotions.

In Isaiah, this "God" is the one that people want to rend the heavens and "come down" amid a fanfare of quaking mountains. This image of a distant "God," larger than life, who resides on a throne in the heavens, is derived from the imperial culture of the ancient Near East with its kingdoms and monarchies. All are subject to the "king" and are to "serve" the "king." Hence, we hear the phrase "return for the sake of your servants" in Isaiah, and the call for God to shine forth "from your throne upon the cherubim" in Psalm 80 where the image of shepherd and king are fused together.

Even the word "God" used in the readings from Isaiah and First Corinthians, is a metaphor rooted in the ancient Canaanite religion. The name of the Canaanite deity was "El;" Israel named its deity "Elohim," the God of the nations. This deity was gendered, a male. Hence, the image of the deity presented in the first reading and in the responsorial psalm is culturally conditioned; it is shaped by an ancient hegemonic culture, and it helps to construct that culture. When we read in the context of the 21st century globalized world leaning toward authoritarian regimes with democracies struggling and under threat, such imagery reinscribes royalty, power, hierarchy and patriarchy — not only to the divine, but also to those who see themselves "as gods" or acting "godly" in religious and political leadership roles. In the prophetic books, the intersection between politics and religion is clear, especially in relation to the works of the deity.

The word "Lord" associated with "God" is part of a grammatical classification system. The writings of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament use the imperial languages of the ancient Near Eastern and Roman empires to construct realities. Lords were large landowners, a privileged class of people who possessed economic and political power. They established their elite status by disenfranchising the peasant classes and smaller landowners. When "Lord" is associated with "father"

and when "Lord" is associated with Christ, as in the phrase "Jesus Christ our Lord," such language reifies the masculine discourse and masculine tradition about God and further reinscribes and construes the maleness of the divine in Western thought.

This image of God as male, all-powerful and "over" all, legitimates the power and status of kings, princes, overlords, fathers, bishops, popes and authoritarian government leaders. Obedience to this "God," to this leader is required and hence, the colonization of peoples takes root socially, politically, religiously, culturally and intellectually.

The readings for this Sunday invite us to think about the divine because the language used was shaped by culture, constructed culture — and continues to construct and shape culture today. The Gospel begs this question: When the divine comes, as we keep watch, whom shall we encounter?

[Carol J. Dempsey is a Dominican Sister of Caldwell, New Jersey, and professor of biblical studies at the University of Portland, Oregon.]

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