

### **What's going on in this picture?**

*The Judgment Day* depicts the archangel Gabriel, in streaming light, standing astride earth and sea—a trumpet in one hand and key to heaven in the other. The painting refers to life after death and how, on the Day of Judgment, the souls of the living and the dead will be redeemed or condemned, depending on their faith and actions during earthly life. Holding a key to the kingdom of heaven in his left hand, Gabriel blows his trumpet to summon the souls of the earth to judgment. The souls of the dead are waking; two of them raise their hands in praise and recognition of the music. The rhythm is conveyed by concentric circles and waves—as if the sound of the trumpet is echoing throughout the work through the yellow, green, and lavender tones.

It was in 1927 that James Weldon Johnson, a writer and activist, asked Douglas to create the illustrations for his book, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*. Each of Johnson's sermons, or poems, was based on a story from the Bible—and each one resounded with the rhythms and cadence of traditional African American sermons. Douglas studied the verses and strove to express these same rhythms in the illustrations he made for the book.

Because *God's Trombones* would be printed in black and white, Douglas worked in a distinctive black and white graphic style for the original illustrations. Later, he revisited the drawings, enlarging and translating many into large, colorful oil paintings—like the one you see here of *Judgment Day*.

Douglas would go on to collaborate with many writers, providing illustrations for their novels and poems. He became one of the most sought-after book illustrators and cover designers of the Harlem Renaissance.

**Art Story: *The Judgment Day* by Aaron Douglas**

Read by Avis Brock

Listen to the beginning of James Weldon Johnson's poem "The Judgment Day:"

In that great day,  
People, in that great day,  
God's a-going to rain down fire.  
God's a-going to sit in the middle of the air  
To judge the quick and the dead.

Early one of these mornings,  
God's a-going to call for Gabriel,  
That tall, bright angel, Gabriel;  
And God's a-going to say to him: Gabriel,  
Blow your silver trumpet,  
And wake the living nations.

And Gabriel's going to ask him: Lord,  
How loud must I blow it?

And God's a-going to tell him: Gabriel,  
Blow it calm and easy.  
Then putting one foot on the mountain top,  
And the other in the middle of the sea,  
Gabriel's going to stand and blow his horn,  
To wake the living nations.