

GOD COMES! OH, BOY!

--Today marks the beginning of the season of Advent, which is a four week journey to Christmas itself. Advent is traditionally understood as a time of eager anticipation. God is about to do something marvelous. God is about to come personally.

The word "advent" is taken straight from Latin, and means a coming, an arrival. So, the recognition of this imminent possibility fills humanity with wonder and expectancy, the feelings traditionally most associated with this period.

If you have some difficulty conjuring up such emotional reactions to these weeks of waiting, you have only to catch something of them in the infectious children around you, as they excitedly count down the days until Santa comes. If you are lucky, regardless of your own age, you may even remember once doing the same yourself. Either way, in doing so, you may be able to recover something of the experience which we, too, have had--and should again have--in making our ways to Christmas Eve.

--This year, as we negotiate these four weeks, the approach that we shall take during this sermon time is one of a brief investigation into various personal responses to the notion of what God has in mind for us. There will be the consistent theme of God's coming, with a different added sub-text each week reflecting a different reaction that we take regarding the prospect of that coming.

This morning we begin with the most immediate and apparent of these reactions--one of basic excitement and celebration: "God is coming! Oh, boy!"

In this, there is the basic recognition that everything is not right with the world, the recognition that everything is not right with our personal worlds, either. There is also the sense that, for whatever reasons, we are not able to correct these situations ourselves, that something is required in insight or in might that we simply lack and that in turn calls out for God's intervention.

We've seen what we can do, what, if left only to ourselves, we will do. Often, it's not a very pretty sight. If things are going to change for the better, God is going to have to enter the picture. And because God loves us, God will. That's the whole premise to the season of Advent.

--The prospect that God is about to be roused into fresh activity is one which initially inspires hope and joy in us. In spite of all previous doubt or pessimism, here we grasp more clearly that the world, while admittedly imperfect and confusing in a million ways, is nevertheless in very good hands. And we begin to understand that that which we endure over our years, even the worst of it, is, in God's hands and in God's time, helpful and useful and purposeful.

Its meaning is to be discovered in that fact that things potentially are about to change. We, the wronged, shall be vindicated. We, the needy, shall be provided for. We, the weak, shall be encouraged and empowered. We, the faithful, shall be rewarded.

God comes! Oh boy!

Touched by such a spirit, we go to the windows and open the curtains, and we go to the doors and let them stand ajar. If God is truly coming, then we wish for nothing to stand in the way of God's getting in to us. So we begin to make all necessary preparations to extend our best hospitality to the Divine whose knock is about to be heard. After all, if we are truly attending to the unfolding moment at hand, injustice is about to be corrected. Wounds are about to be healed. Our longing is about to be satisfied.

--You may have noticed that there is a curious paradox that is related to this focus on the general theme of God's coming. We shall have occasion to revisit it a few times over these weeks.

On one hand, God's being God, with everything that we understand that to mean regarding God's power and influence and authority, it must follow that this Divine advent actually can occur at any time that God sees fit to initiate it. God's being God, what conceivably can oppose it?

On the other hand, however, if God, as we also believe, is best characterized as love, then God is not able to roll out this advent just anytime and with just anyone at all. After all, love is never coercive; it is only ever responsive.

What that means is that, where there is no existential hunger for God's coming, there will be no advent. Because of God's nature as lover, not rapist, even this promised coming can occur only where God is wanted and invited and awaited. It is a difficult point to which this morning we may easily agree in theory. But we will find that it will entail some surprising and uncomfortable twists in the next few weeks.

--For the moment, then, let us revel in the fundamental notion that something momentous is stirring in our behalf. There is an opening of sorts being made available to us. And remembering and honoring God's emergence into the human order so many generations ago, we deeply remind ourselves that, in its own way, this birth can take place once again in this generation, among us, within us. At the deeper, spiritual level, that's why we recall and rehearse what happens all those centuries ago in that Bethlehem stable.

You see, all this Advent and Christmas stuff is not just about what God did in the past. It is very much about what God is preparing to do in the present, wherever hospitality is shown.

"I am the Lord, that is my name," says Yahweh through the prophet, speaking not only to those in the 6th Century B.C.E. but as well to us of the 21st Century C.E. "Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare. Before they spring forth, I tell you of them" (Is 42.8,9).

As God speaks of what is about to occur, as the way is prepared anew for this coming again to persons, as things are on the verge of changing, in this celebrated time of anticipating and waiting, it is important for us to have some idea as to where exactly, at the moment, we are in all this:

As God is poised to move afresh--among us, within us--what sort of hospitality are we prepared to demonstrate?

In all honesty, how ready, how willing, are we for this coming?

In the weeks that lie ahead, we shall see.