

GOD COMES! OH, YES!

--This morning our four week journey nears its end. The waiting of Advent is about to be fulfilled! Christmas is now at hand! Ritually speaking--which suggests that it is true at both outer and inner levels--the God who promises to come is poised to arrive soon!

With this fourth Sunday in the season, we will have completed our identification of several various personal reactions to the good news of God's coming to us. We know that to be expected here is an initially heightened spirit--what, in week one, has been characterized as the "oh, boy!" response. In this, there is some excitement, some thrill attached to the possibility of God's advent.

Upon deeper consideration, however, as reflected over weeks two and three, we also know to anticipate some less flattering responses on our parts--a certain cautious reluctance, for example, an "uh-oh!" that surfaces as soon as we realize that God's coming means some unwanted things that we could not have calculated; and an even more outright resistance to going in the way that God woos us, motivated by a stiffened "oh, no!" which is embarrassingly effective in delaying, blunting, even undermining God's will.

--This morning, then, we arrive at the fourth of these predictable reactions--what I am calling the "oh, yes!" of it all.

Like the "oh, boy!" with which we started these weeks, the "oh, yes!" is affirming, but it is not so naïve in its enthusiasm. The "oh, boy!" is excited about merely the general, only-abstract idea that God might have present access to our lives, without examining the sometimes-disorienting and even shattering impact that that could have. By contrast, the "oh, yes!" knows of the risks and the ambiguities of opening oneself to the initiatives of God, and opens up to God anyhow. While the two are both notably affirmative, then, the "oh, yes!" is a much profounder personal response.

The "oh, yes!" mirrors a more experienced sense of a living, growing intimacy with God. The better acquainted we are with God, the better prepared we are to negotiate all the uncertainties, all the surprises, all the unimagined twists and turns that the path will take. God, despite all the startling changes in course, can be welcomed and embraced simply because God is known always to be good and to be loving.

--That brings us to this morning's reading from Isaiah 40. The image here is not one of God the authoritarian Judge, ruling over the people with exacting standards and a quick rod of discipline; rather, it is one of God, the attentive, longsuffering Lover, relating to the people with abiding sympathy and understanding and compassion. The God who addresses Israel here speaks of comfort, tenderly consoling the people, whispering words of encouragement in their ears and words of fond affection in their hearts, stilling fears and instilling confidence.

The “oh, yes!” resounds from within us, then, not because we are fearful that, if we fail to obey, God will crush us like the bugs we are, but because experience has taught us that, in this awesome universe of ours, there persists a gentle and loving regard for the likes of us. The hand that is extended to humanity is not one which is intended to pound us into oblivion, but to support and assist as we conscientiously make our ways higher.

--Our "oh, yes!" response, by the way, is far greater than merely the accepting of God's coming, which makes it sound like some superficial intellectual thing. It's more than just considering the theoretical possibility of God's coming and then agreeing to it.

Accepting is about adding up the pluses and minuses and then arriving at the most rational decision that can be made. That straightforward adding-up and deciding might work well elsewhere in our lives, but it will fail pretty miserably in the case of our relationship with God, because, strictly in terms of logic, there are far too many minuses ever to lead to a decision in favor of God. There are simply far too many unforeseeables, far too many wild cards in life's deck when shuffled and dealt by God, ever to have such a decision be regarded as the most reasonable one. In fact, given all the dicey variables, the most rational decision is to keep God away, to keep God out. Welcoming God's coming, then, is perhaps the most irrational thing we could ever do.

In terms of our genuinely embracing God's coming to us, what makes the difference is not an accepting, but a trustfully surrendering. At the heart of our “oh, yes!” is trustful surrender. It is the sort of eyes-closed confidence that one experiences beside one's lover in the dark. Regardless of what cannot be seen clearly and what cannot be known completely, there is the absolute assurance that one's lover would never do anything to hurt one. Where there is love, there can be trusting submission of the highest degree--and with the greatest positive results.

It is precisely as Franciscan father Richard Rohr states in one of his many books. He writes, "There is no time, no place, no situation in which God is not loving you. There is no way God is not loving you." Then, he adds, not coincidentally, "[But] we have to be the continual 'yes' for the love to come through" (Radical Grace, p. 68). The “continual 'yes'.” There is that “oh, yes!” again.

--The final words in this morning's reading carry the powerful image of this gentle, caring Creator: "[God] will feed his flock like a shepherd. [God] will gather the lambs in his arms . . . carry them in his bosom, and gently lead [them] . . ." (40.11).

If we are to become and to sustain "the continual 'yes'," as Father Rohr encourages, then we need to be aware that these are words which describe, not what God has done in some remotely past time or even what God might do some distant future day.

For those who are personally familiar with the coming of this God, these words describe perfectly what God is already doing for us, even though we typically don't look for it or pay any mind to it--which is what makes God's appearance always seem so sudden. The point of the season is that we should be expecting God to draw close to us, all the time.

If we find that, for whatever reason, this has been our experience this year, then we are truly ready for Advent to give way to Christmas. We are ready to hear those endearing nativity vignettes and sing those beloved carols, for we may now understand something that we didn't quite grasp before. We are ready for all the waiting, even for that of a lifetime, to bring about a birth, one within that is of God.

--Half of the meaning of this season is patently obvious: God desired to come--and did. That half is about Jesus.

If it stops right there, however--and for most people, it does--we haven't caught the entire meaning. The best part is missing.

The other half may be just beginning to come into view: God desires to come--and will. That hugely important half is about us.

Oh, yes! Our God is a God who comes!

What do you do now? What will we do now?