

Second Sunday after Christmas, 2021

Readings: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Luke 2:41-52

Focus Statement: Together, these four readings remind us of the *joy* of the fact of the Incarnation: our “yes” to God’s definitive “yes.”

Growing up, my favorite thing when Christmas rolled around was the 25 Days of Christmas series on (then) ABC Family. It had all the classics: *Elf*, *Home Alone*, the puppeted *Rudolph*, and my personal favorite, *Jack Frost* (which I’ve recently re-watched and wished I hadn’t). The feeling of this program was sort of like a month-long drumroll that came to point on Christmas Day; Christmas was the culmination of all our waiting and watching, the grand finale of the month.

Our liturgical season, however, actually makes the *opposite* case of something like that drumroll, and one I think is more compelling. Christmas isn’t the end, but the beginning. In a way, what our season suggests is that God’s yes comes before ours. Before we ever think to celebrate, to count down, God gives us his own yes and stirs ours up. And to say that Christmas is *twelve* days, is to say this season could never be contained in just one day.

So, in the spirit of the still-ongoing Christmas, I’d like us to consider *all* of these readings together—Jeremiah, Psalm 84, Ephesians, Luke—because each of them almost *shakes* with this excitement over the arrival of God. On its own, any one of these readings is fruitful for a Christmas sermon, but together they reveal each other’s excitement, each other’s “yes.” They are drawn together over their praise of the presence of God in their midst, and they offer us a glimpse into what our response might look like in these twelve days.

I want us to consider two things this morning, or two yesses. The yes which God in Christ gives to us, and the yes which we give in return as a consequence of God’s “enfleshment.”¹

Let’s begin in that place from whence the cries of the Bible often arise: exile. Jeremiah’s reading today is a comfort for the people of Israel who will soon be in bondage. As a prophet, Jeremiah is positioned right on the precipice of Israel’s coming displacement by the Babylonians in 597 BCE. When the Babylonians came to take over Jerusalem, they relocated Israelites, stripped them away from their homes and their families, and Jeremiah had the easy task of announcing this coming tragedy to his people. So, Ellen Davis writes, “Jeremiah charts the long descent into the pit of Jerusalem’s destruction.”² It’s a book where woes predominate, and comfort is rare.

But today, Jeremiah looks into a future even *more* distant and declares,

*Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,
And raise shouts for the chief of the nations*

*See, I am going to bring them forth from the land of the north country,
And gather them from the farthest parts of the earth*

*With weeping they shall come,
And with consolations I will lead them back.*

Here, a brief glimmer of hope, a light at the end of the tunnel they have not yet entered. In other moments, Jeremiah, speaking for God, promises “I will not make a full end of you,” (Jeremiah 5:8).

¹ St. Athanasius

² Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel’s Scriptures* (Oxford: OUP, 2019), 280.

But instead, “I will turn their mourning into joy,/ I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.” Israel, Jeremiah announces, *will* return to its land. God’s *no* will not be forever.

If we are thinking still of Christmas, of the beginning of the Incarnation of God, we see that God (while we were living in a far-off land), has *not* made a full end of us, has decided after all to comfort us, to turn our mourning into joy, give us gladness for sorrow. Both in Jeremiah and in the birth of Christ, God offers a “yes” to his people. And this “yes” *precedes* our “yes.”

This is what is meant by the *promevity* of God (or *pronobeity*), the for-me-ness/for-us-ness of God. In the birth of Christ we find that God offers himself, is by nature, *for us*, oriented by this “yes” which precedes our awareness of him. Even before there is an exile, God declares, “I will not make a full end of you.” In another way, we might say that we repent only having first known grace.

So, not only does it precede our yes, but God’s “yes” is the *beginning* of our “yes.” From Jeremiah, “*then* shall the young women rejoice in the dance,/ and the young men and the old be merry.” Liberated from exile, the people simply, dance, celebrate in response to what God has done for them. In Psalm 84, we read, “My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the LORD;/ my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.” At the presence of God, these verses themselves seem to stretch into another register. They cannot simply list the works of God, bullet them out, but take up poetry, sing, dance, they *long* for God.

Our reading from Ephesians is even more ecstatic. In Ephesians, one sentence stretches across 4 or five verses. Meaning, verses 15-19 from our reading are one *single* sentence in Greek, “so that you might know what is the hope of his calling, what are the riches of the glory of his inheritance for the saints.” The writer of Ephesians is overjoyed, such that one, meager sentence cannot quite do justice to God’s yes in Christ. Here, speaking must be stretched into a winding, run-on sentence; into dancing; into praise. Again, *one* day of Christmas won’t do for our calendar. We need *twelve*.

To be clear, what *all* of these readings reveal together is that our response of praise is elicited primarily by God coming near us *first*. To share in the divine life is *only* possible because the *divine life* has shared in *human* life. And this is cause for, this *begins*, our celebration. As one writer says, “The grace of God is fundamentally a *call*.”³ And this call and simultaneous grace is offered to us by the mere fact of Christ’s Incarnation.

Our collect this morning is, I think, a perfect Christmas prayer. We pray, “O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity.” Christmas is, in short, the season in which God gives his definitive “yes” to us in Christ, and we begin our lifelong task of saying “yes” in return.

So in close, on this second Sunday after Christmas Day, we are reminded of these twelve days in which we are *still* living. We are invited, at the end, to follow the example of Mary: “to treasure all these things” in our heart. To safeguard that “yes,” and bring it forth as our own to God. Or, in the words of 2 Corinthians, “For in Christ, every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes.’” And it is “through him that we say ‘Amen,’ [yes] to the glory of God.”

Amen.

³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Engagement with God: The Drama of Christian Discipleship*, trans. R. John Halliburton (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 28.