

June 24, 2018
Nativity of John the Baptist '18

Isaiah says, "My reward is with the Lord; my recompense is with my God"

I don't want you to encounter God, I want you to want to encounter God.

Who could not feel relieved at hearing that: "Our *reward is with the Lord; our recompense is with our God.*" But if sometimes it doesn't feel like this is the way our relationship with God is going, it may have to do with the kind of God we find ourselves believing in.

How big is your God?

Paul Coutino, SJ, a Jesuit from Goa who also teaches at St. Louis University, addressed this issue in a presentation I heard him give some time ago, and it stayed with me, which is why I would like to share some of it with you. Perhaps something in it may strike something in you as it struck something in me. His talk was titled, "*How big is your God.*"

"How big is your God? This is not an academic question. My answer to that question will affect the way I live my life, how I see myself, how I relate to others and to the rest of the world.

"How big *IS* your God? Is your God today bigger than the one that was introduced to you as a child? Is your God bigger today than the one you were relating to 20 years ago? Is your God bigger today than the God you encountered at the beginning of this year?

"A small God is seen as the "Great Other" who is "Out There" somewhere with whom we can never come close to, cannot be intimate with. If God is "Out There," then creation and human beings are "In Here," and the distance between the two is great. There can be no direct prayer to this God, it is only mediated through an official other, the priests, to take our offerings to this distant God.

"The good news is that this distant God is not the God of the second chapter of Genesis. In the second story of creation, God comes down and plays with the clay. He takes that clay and breathes life into it, and what was clay becomes man-woman. And then She creates everything else. This God is one who is intimate with us, who walks with us in the cool of the evening, who eats with us, talks with us, who is with us.

"Now if my God is little and "Out There", I will end up feeling anxious, guilty, and afraid, and my relationships will be limited. But if mine is a God who keeps getting bigger and greater, there will be an inner freedom, a total freedom, where grace is not merited but celebrated, not just by some, but by all."

Fr. Paul's question is directed to us: How big is your God? How big is my God? This is not an academic question. Our answer to that question will affect the way we live our lives, how we see ourselves, how we relate to each other and to the rest of the world.

I suspect we would all want to relate to a God who is bigger than the one we have, but we may in fact have become rather attached to this God who is smaller - one who sides with the political party of my choice, one who disapproves of those with whom I disapprove, one who condemns those whom I condemn, one who always agrees with what I think.

That is a God of our childhood. Being opened to a bigger God is going to take us deeper into the spiritual and moral issues of our day where - my concerns include other's concerns, where my issues include other's issues, where my well-being includes the well-being of others. Being opened to a bigger God will take us into unknown territories that will challenge our comfort zones and addictions of choice.

The Colt

I witnessed an example of not wanting to leave the familiar on a Peace Farm that Fr. Jack, my predecessor here, and others started in Chehalis, Washington, during the 1980's. One of the works we took on was to pasture horses in our three pastures. One mare gave birth to a colt in one of these pastures, and the colt spent its entire first year in that pasture, never leaving it. The next year, the owner decided to move the horses to another pasture. All the horses moved onto the new pasture, except the colt. That colt would not move, it would not leave that pasture. It would take off at full gallop, and we couldn't catch it. That was the only pasture it knew, it was comfortable in that pasture and was not going to leave it.

The comparison is obvious. We like the familiar, but something will inevitably occur that will move us into a larger pasture, into the unknown, into a bigger God, whether we like it or not. Our task is to allow ourselves to be moved into it.

So, what happened with the colt? When the owner finally caught it, he roped it to the mare's neck thinking she would lead the colt out. That didn't work. The mare became excited and began bucking and kicking, almost hitting the owner. I stood off at a distance at this point. It was like having a rodeo right there in our own pasture. Finally, the owner simply picked up the colt and carried it out.

There's no sense in our trying to stay in our own pastures of choice. Eventually, God will pick us up and carry us into a bigger one, into a deeper relationship with Her/Him and the world. It will be there that we will discover how big our God is, big enough to come looking for us in those far corners where we are hiding, to walk with us in the cool of the evening, to eat with us, to talk with us, to be with us, to offer to us the reward of deeper peace and deeper relationships with those around us, which is:

"Our reward with the Lord and our recompense with God"

I don't want you to encounter a bigger God, I want you to want to encounter a bigger God.