

In the name of the Father and of the ✝Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's that time of year again. It's that time I dread more than any other time of the year, in fact. During the rest of the year, everything seems to fall into its proper place, yet at this time of the year, things seem disordered and out of place.

No, it's not my home as the decoration boxes come upstairs and mix with everything else we own, nor the attempts to find a decent parking place at the mall, either. It's the fact that it is First Sunday in Advent, a time of preparation and reflection on *second* coming of Christ. The rest of the world, however, has long been celebrating the expectation of the *first* coming of Christ—that wonderful day known as Christmas.

How's a pastor supposed to preach in competition with "Need a little Christmas" on half the radio stations in the world? It seems especially difficult as we contemplate the apocalyptic nature of the lessons for this Sunday, the first day of the new church year.

These first two Sundays in Advent focus our attention not on the coming of the Christ Child, an historic event that we know happened, even if we're not certain that it happened on what we now know as December 25th, but on the promised return of Christ the King to rule for all eternity in power and might. Our Gospel text is often called the "little apocalypse," that time when Christ will descend from heavens to pick up the pieces, if you will, following the times of trial and tribulation that lead up to the Second Coming. Just as the disciples would see the Son of Man ascending into the clouds of heaven following the Resurrection, Jesus promises that the world will behold the Son of Man descending from heaven at the last day. Moreover, this will happen before the passing of "this generation," Jesus tells them.

I've always been intrigued by the words of Jesus when he told his disciples that "this generation will not pass away" until after everything he said in the preceding verses came to pass. To my knowledge, the signs which Jesus said we are to look for have not come to pass yet, and I don't recall hearing about any 2,000-year-old

men or women running around (except for the character created by Mel Brooks, and I sure hope Jesus didn't mean to count *him* as part of "this generation"). So what are we to make of this? Are the words of Jesus wrong? Did Mark make them up in hopes that the promised Second Coming would be soon after the Resurrection? Did Jesus tell a falsehood to his disciples, and if he did, when did he know it was a falsehood and why hasn't it been investigated by a special prosecutor yet? Or, is the Vatican actually holding in secret the 2,000 year old man on some form of life support as part of some great conspiracy with the Freemasons?

Or, have we all misunderstood what Jesus means by "this generation"? I suggest that this is the most likely situation, and an explanation might be found in next week's second lesson from the Second Letter of Peter, where we hear that a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like a day to the Lord God. If Peter is correct, then the "generation" might be a 20-year period in God's time, or some 20,000 years by human reckoning.

The truth is, we do not know the day or hour of Christ's return. In fact, even Jesus himself declares that he won't know that, either, until it is revealed by the Father. So, just as we have no real idea when Jesus was actually born, other than about nine months after the angel Gabriel came to Mary, we have no idea when he will return, either.

And that, my dear friends, is OK. We human beings don't have to know, with certainty, every single thing that happens in the course of history. There is a place, or there should be a place, in our lives for mystery. There is a place, or there should be a place, in our lives for time to work on some scale other than one of human definition.

God doesn't live on Eastern Standard Time, or even on Prophet's Time. Consider our dear friend, Isaiah, who called upon the Lord in the words of lament offered this morning, begging God to open the heavens and come down to earth. "If only you'd be down here, God, I know the people would be faithful to you and do your will and not turn away from you!" This plea from the prophet is, of course, not answered in the prophet's time, but in due time—in God's time—the prophet's plea for God to come down to earth and set things right is answered.

What is amazing, at least from human terms, is that when God finally does show up on earth, it is not in the form of some powerful king on a white horse, cutting down the enemies of the Chosen People, saving them from centuries of subordination to foreign powers. Rather, God makes Himself present on earth in the form of an innocent baby, born of a young woman who has been lucky—or unlucky—enough to marry into the house of David, the great king of the people of Israel.

People still pray that God will send His Son into the world again to bring order and discipline into the world. Others still await the first appearance of the Messiah. Others still don't expect any such thing to happen, and in fact scoff at the idea of God. Amazing how the world hasn't changed very much since the time Isaiah penned his lamentation to God, asking God to come and rescue His people, setting aside any anger or displeasure He might have with them.

God does hear His children's pleas. And, God responds to those pleas. He just does it on His time, and in the way He feels is best.

Jesus was born, lived, died, and rose from the grave for us and for our salvation. We celebrate that every single Sunday of the church year, for every Sunday is indeed a "little Easter." We continue to await the coming of Christ, praying that he would tear open the heavens and come down in order to put those who do not believe into their proper place.

At the same time, we hope that he isn't too angry with us for not being so faithful ourselves....