

ACTIVE WAITING

Imagine for a few moments that you're a child again.

You're on a car trip, sitting in the back seat, watching through the window as trees and fences and telephone poles blur by.

The distractions you brought along—toys to play with, comic books to read, an iPod and headphones to listen to the kind of music you like—have long since become passé.

It's time to break the doldrums of listening to the tires rolling along on the highway and looking for out of state license plates, so you ask "the question."

You know the question I'm talking about, right? In fact, you could probably say it for me.

"Mom, Dad . . . Are we there yet? When will we get there?"

And your parents will probably give you the standard adult response.

"Soon."

On this second Sunday of Advent, as we once again hear the message that Jesus the Messiah will return someday to usher in God's kingdom, we're like kids in the back seat of God's car.

And as God our pilot continues driving us along on the highway of history, headed toward the destination He has in mind, we can't help but ask the Lord—or at least ask ourselves—that same question.

God, is he here yet?

When will Jesus come?

"Soon."

Soon, Lord? How long is soon?

After 2000 years of waiting, yearning for Christ to return and heal this broken, hurting world of ours and replace our flawed human way of living with God's way of living, it's understandable if we're getting a little antsy.

And perhaps we're not satisfied when, every time the season of Advent rolls around, we hear the message that Jesus is going to return, and it could happen soon.

Because the term "soon" is relative.

When it comes to Jesus returning for us and transforming the world into God's realm, some will say that day can't come soon enough.

And when the day finally comes that Jesus does return, others will no doubt say that he came too soon.

Penny and I have been busy packing up things and giving away a lot of our "stuff" as we prepare to move to our new condominium in Old Orchard Beach.

When it comes to our desire to begin residing in our own place after thirty-three years of living in parsonages, and before that living in apartments—moving day can't come soon enough.

But when we look around at everything we still have to pack up or get rid of, moving day is coming way too soon.

When I was a kid, in the summer my mother would sometimes take me and my brothers and sisters to Palace Playland in Old Orchard Beach.

There we would fill our stomachs with Pier Fries and big slices of Bill's Pizza, and go on the Ferris Wheel and the Merry-Go-Round and this long, long slide that took ten minutes to climb up and thirty seconds to slide down on. We Gagnon kids all loved going there!

Not surprisingly, on those days when we planned to go to OOB, when my mother told us we would be leaving soon, my siblings and I all knew it would be much longer, and we would have to wait for "soon."

When I was a young kid, I knew nothing about adult schedules and timetables and responsibilities. All I knew was that "soon" was something different to my mother than it was to me; and waiting was an essential requirement of a child's job description.

Waiting is also an essential requirement of a Christian's job description during this season of Advent. And it puts us all—from cradle to cane—in the position of a child.

In our reading from 2 Peter, the author writes, “But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness.”

That’s something we should file away in our minds so we can remind ourselves whenever we grow impatient with God. God’s sense of time is much different than ours. So different, in fact, that our brains can’t even fathom it. With God, everything is “soon.” A thousand years is like a day.

So here we are, once again gathering for worship during the season of Advent, sitting in the backseat of God’s car, asking when we will get there, and being told once again, just like past Advents, “Soon. Just wait.”

But for Christians like us, waiting isn’t the bad thing that children experience as the clock ever so slowly ticks down towards Christmas morning, or the odometer racks up miles at a snail’s pace as the family drives to Grandma and Grandpa’s house.

Instead, this waiting, this intermediate time between Jesus’ first and second coming, is described by 2 Peter as an opportunity for us. It’s not a passive waiting we have to put up with and endure, but an active waiting during which we have a chance for us to get things ready.

“The Lord is not slow about his promise [to return],” wrote Peter, “but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but for all to come to repentance.”

In other words, God is taking as much time as necessary so that as many people as possible can enter God’s kingdom.

It would be best, then, if the term we use during this season of Advent isn’t “We have to wait,” but “We need to be ready.”

Think of it in terms of Christmas baking.

You mix up the dough, snitch a little bit in the process even at the risk of contracting salmonella, cut the cookies into the shape of Christmas trees, wreaths and Santa’s boots, and then plop them on a cookie sheet.

You place the cookie sheet in the oven, set the timer for ten to thirteen minutes . . . and then take them out after five minutes.

Are you doing anyone a favor by giving them the cookies early?

Of course not! If you want Christmas cookies the way they should be, the entire time of baking needs to pass.

As we wait and wait and wait, asking from time to time—“Are we there yet?”—God’s response to us, “soon” isn’t spoken to pacify us. It’s not a put-off. We just aren’t there yet. But we will get there in God’s good time.

Just like when Christmas cookies aren't fully baked and not ready to eat yet, things aren't ready for Christ's return because God isn't ready yet.

So when we hear the words "Wait" and "Soon" during this season of Advent, they're words of kindness and encouragement.

My friends, in God's eyes, things aren't done yet. God's Kingdom is only half-baked. Everyone's not onboard. We've been given more time to share the word, invite other people to become members of God's flock, and carry on the work of our Lord here on earth.

In other words, our waiting for Christ's second coming is meant to be a time of active waiting.

This is a very important point. Without actively engaging in the task of waiting, it loses its gift of opportunity. It becomes a time of wasted waiting.

But our work as Christians is to be active waiters, keeping busy and on task for Jesus. And as we do, we grow in faith and trust that someday—maybe even soon—we will reach our destination. In the end, we will get to grandma and grandpa's. Christmas morning will dawn. Jesus will come again. Just wait and see.

Let me finish my message this morning with a little story. It's actually about active praying, but the point is still the same.

A little girl ran up to her mother, quite upset. She said that her brother and his friends had set a trap to catch birds.

"Well, what did you do?" her mother asked.

"I prayed that the trap wouldn't work so it won't catch any birds," the girl said.

"Did you do anything else?"

"Yes, I prayed that God would protect the birds and keep them out of the trap."

"Anything else?" her mother asked.

"Yes. Then I went out and kicked the trap all to pieces."

That's active praying. And that's something we should practice, as well. But that's another sermon. For now, during this Advent season, it's enough to know that our calling is to do more than sit back and wait for the Messiah to come. We need to be active waiters.

Christ is calling us to feed the hungry, help the poor, comfort the grieving and make God's love known in the world, so that as many people as possible can catch a glimpse of what God's kingdom is all about, and want to be a part of it.

May we do those kinds of things while we wait for the Advent promise of Christ's coming to be fully realized. Thanks be to God. Amen.