

Happy New Year. To be honest, I can't figure out why New Year's calls for a celebration. Mostly New Year's means that another year has come and gone and now another year is upon us. Time comes and time goes. Is that reason enough for a party? These are the questions of a person in my age group, I presume...a person who has more yesterdays on his account than tomorrows.

But what are we to make of time and its passage?

They say that in Martin Luther's class on Genesis, a smart aleck student asked, "Dr. Luther, since you know so much about the book of Genesis, tell us: what was God doing all that time before God created the world?"

Luther, not to be one-upped by a smart-mouthed seminarian, replied, "What was God doing before God created the world? God was gathering sticks to make a switch to swat the backside of people like you who ask such dumb questions!"

But seriously, what was God doing all that time? It's not a dumb question. What was there for God to do before God did for us? What did God think about before God thought about you and me?

And in the Exodus – it was wonderful when God finally came down and heard the cry of the Hebrew slaves. But some of the glory of the Exodus fades when one realizes that they had been crying in slavery *for 430 years!* Why did God wait 430 years before liberating the Hebrew children?

The Bible has been called the book of the "mighty acts of God." But according to my reckoning, the Bible covers well over 4,000 years of God's history. True, there are some really impressive, though occasional, actions by God. There are some rather long periods of time, if you read between the lines of scripture, when God doesn't seem to do anything, or at least anything worth writing down about.

And almost everything we know about Jesus takes place in less than a three year span after he was thirty.

Question: What was Jesus doing all that time before he was thirty? Jesus must have done something memorable during all those years. But no – apparently nothing noteworthy.

In John's Gospel, Mary and Martha send Jesus the urgent plea, "Lazarus, our brother whom you love, is ill. Come quick!" (Jn 11). Friend Lazarus is near death. Two terrified sisters wait anxiously.

John says that Jesus waited *three more days* before setting out for Bethany. Why? No reason is given. It doesn't say that Jesus was otherwise engaged. By the time Jesus got to Bethany, Lazarus was dead, the funeral was over, he was entombed.

Jesus tells Martha, when she chides him for taking his own sweet time to get to Bethany, to settle down because this was all "for the glory of God." What's the "glory" in taking three days to respond to someone in such urgent need?

Saint Augustine, in thinking about time, says that God doesn't count time as we count time. I'll say.

And Paul tells his churches, "Don't marry! Don't worry about being slaves! Don't bother about persecution by the government! It will all be over soon. The Lord is coming – sometime."

Some of his churches wrote to Paul saying, "Okay. We're hurting. It's been decades. We're still waiting! Any word on when you expect Jesus?"

And 2nd Peter answers, "Er, uh, don't you know that with the Lord, one day is like a thousand of our years? What seems like a long time to you is no time at all to an eternal God" (2 Peter 3:8 paraphrased).

Nice try, 2nd Peter, but that doesn't cut it, not when we're being persecuted and executed.

In this morning's lesson (which just happens to be our theme for the year...perhaps you've noticed a quote from this lesson at the top of our Sunday bulletins from time to time) Ecclesiastes eloquently proclaims that there is a time to be born and a time to die, a time to make peace and a time to make war, a time to laugh and a time to cry. For everything under heaven there is just the right time. Beautiful thought.

But all this talk about the right time is preceded in Ecclesiastes chapter 2 by a not-so-beautiful thought: *And only God knows when that right time is!*

There is just the right time for this, and the right time for that, but you'll never know the time! God just doesn't keep time the way we keep time.

In one of his parables Jesus tells a story about a woefully unproductive fig tree that's wasted a lot of time. Three years...no figs. Fig trees should bear every year. And in Judea, fig trees even bear fruit twice every year. But this tree has never borne fruit.

"Cut it down!" says the owner. "Time's up."

But a servant pleads, "Master, let it alone (Greek: *aphetes*, which also can mean "forgive it"). I'll dig around it, pile manure on it, and then, let's see what happens and you can do as you please."

Three years is a long time to wait for fruit, a long time to be patient with such a worthless tree in a place where land is at a premium. And still the servant begs for more time for the tree.

There are times, when we're waiting on God to do something for us, when (sad to say) God seems to take forever. *And there are times when God is waiting on us to do something for God, when (thank God) God seems to give us more time.* .

"Lord, make haste to save us!" cries the psalmists (Ps 22:19; 31:22; 40:13; 70:1). In my experience, rarely does God hurry. And that's hard, especially when you are suffering, or needing an answer, or waiting for deliverance.

And sometimes divine tardiness is a blessing.

Jesus tells a story about a tree that, ought to be cut down. Yet a servant pleads, "Master, give it some more time." And that's grace, especially when you have yet to bear the good fruit that God expects from you, or when you have not yet come to blossom into what you were created to be. In such times, God's delay is God's gift. There's still time.

So it's a new year. God has given us yet more time. During 2011 what will we do with the time? What will God do with 2011? That's the expectant question before us. Let us enter into this new year with expectancy.

The Gospel-good news for this first Sunday of a brand new year is this: *By God's grace there's still time.*

Prayer

Almighty God, you are Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end of all things in heaven and earth. At the beginning of another year and the passing away of an old year, we gather, to praise you for the gift of time, a New Year that stands before us...
...to seek your guidance and care in the days ahead...
...to show our confidence that as we journey into another year, you journey with us. Amen.