

A couple weeks ago I was reading The Christian Century (Nov. 8, 2017), a national Protestant theological magazine, and a story there by a Methodist Pastor from Seattle, Rodolph Rowe, describing an incident at a Christmas service, struck me. As he wrote, “[I]t was Christmas morning. I planned a simple service. We’d sing a few carols, tell the holy story, pray for hope and peace in the world, and celebrate communion.

When the kids came forward for children’s time I let them share their excitement . . . and told them that we must be grateful and generous with the many things we have. When I was halfway through my remarks, a little boy I’ll call Jake, who must have been seven or eight, suddenly stood up, clenched his fists, and said in aloud voice, “I hate my dad!”

The congregation gasped. His older brother tried to pull him back down and shush him, but Jake pulled violently away. His brother abandoned him and went to sit with his mother. “He promised to come

for Christmas,” cried Jake, “but we woke up and he wasn’t there. He made my mom cry, and I hate him. He’s a big, fat liar.”

“He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his work.” Advent begins today with readings focused on waiting for the second coming of Christ at the end of time. In our Gospel Jesus compares Himself to a man going on a journey – think here of Jesus’ Ascension to heaven after His Resurrection – who leaves His servants (that’s us) in charge here on earth, “each with his work,” until he returns. That “each with his work” is the phrase I want to concentrate on in this homily.

In this life we are waiting for Jesus, but it’s not supposed to be a passive waiting. We’re each of us supposed to be working while we wait for Him. When Jesus talks about the servants falling asleep He means forgetting about that work we each have been given by the Master, and forgetting that He is even returning. Jesus’ point is that we each have God-given work to do in life. And these tasks are ours alone.

Think about that: Jesus has given you and me, personally, tasks to accomplish in this short life.

On January 1, at the beginning of the secular year, we make New Year's resolutions. These usually focus on our own self-improvement, trying to change ourselves in some way for the better, get up earlier, lose weight, floss more. And, yes, there is our own personal holiness and relationship with Jesus. We are meant to work on that. But on the first Sunday of Advent, the Church's New Year's Day, we're meant to reflect, not on our own self-improvement, but on how God has given us unique missions to help other people's lives.

What might these missions be? Maybe the Holy Spirit has prompted us as part of our mission to reach out to that elderly person who has nobody else. Maybe it's to volunteer at this or that organization. Maybe it's to serve in some other capacity. Those are relatively small tasks – and maybe short term. We all given assignments of that kind that we must carefully discern.

But there are some tasks we can be sure God is asking of us because they flow from our vocations. For myself, I know Jesus has given me is the task of Pastoring this parish in such a way that you all have a good chance to know Jesus. If you're married I know that one of your God-given tasks is to work for your spouse's holiness. If you have children, another task I know you have is to love and rear your kids as well as you can, giving them the proper time, love, and attention.

Here we come back to Jake's story. At the heart of Jake's sad Christmas is a Father who is failing in his God-given mission towards his family. He's just not there. That's what mission failure feels like – wounded hearts and lives. I don't know the details in this case, but behind so much human pain is this failure to show up to one's God-given task. "He promised he would come for Christmas, but we woke up and he wasn't there."

The thing is, nobody else can substitute for us in our own God-given work. Rodolph Rowe goes on in his story about Jake to say that

after a shocked moment of silence, he was given the grace to take Jake in his arms and whisper to this tearful little boy words of comfort. But Rowe couldn't take the place of an absent father. None of us can take another's place in Jesus' plan. I don't know what all those roles might be in your case. But the question is: do you?

This Advent we could each take time to consider and name what tasks, big and small, Jesus has given us personally to carry out for Him. Then let us ask ourselves, which of those tasks am I doing well at? Which of my God-given tasks am I ignoring, or failing at?

Whether it's Jesus' second coming, or at our death, He's coming we know not when. We can't wait for Him passively. He's left us in charge of His world, so we had better get on with it. We each have our work to do while there's still time. Otherwise there will just be more and more tears. In this season we wait to celebrate the birth of a little boy at Christmas. He's counting on us to show up.