

Isn't one time enough?

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Every few years a fringe Christian leader or group predicts when Jesus Christ is coming back to earth. The latest date, announced on billboards in some mid-sized American cities, is [May 21 of this year](#).

It does not seem to matter to these groups that dates have been set before in church history, and that the dates come and go and Jesus doesn't make his appearance. Apparently hope--and hype--springs eternal in the hearts of those with millennial aspirations.

The second coming was a fairly dominant theme in the congregation I grew up in. It was a fearful prospect: would I be ready when he came? If he takes all his followers with him, would I be left behind? Would I get caught in some act that displeases Jesus?

If no one was home when I got home from school, I'd worry about whether Jesus might have come already, taking the rest of my family and leaving me behind. It never occurred to me then to ask what

kind of messiah would take an entire family away from a young boy, making him an orphan.

The church I belong to today doesn't emphasize the second coming. About every two years we have a heavenly banquet. A large table is set up in the sanctuary, laden with fruit, sweets and drinks. At some point in the service we're invited to come forward, fill our plate with goodies and eat together in a symbolic anticipation of the great eschatological feast that Jesus talked about.

My sense is that mainline Protestants don't make much of the second coming, either. Except at funerals, faith is more about the here and now, not the hither and yon. True, people recite the creed, but what do they think they're affirming when they intone together that Jesus ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father and will come again to judge the living and the dead? If congregants stop to think about what they've affirmed, what does his "coming again" conjure up in their minds?

Recently a mainline friend reported that her three-year-old son had asked her, "Is Jesus coming back?" My friend is going through the ordination process in the United Methodist Church and has just sent off her ordination papers. She was relieved to be able to respond to her son's question with a "yes" rather than to have to write a theological paper on the question.

But her son's question got me thinking: why would Jesus even want to come back again when he was roughed up and finally murdered the first time he came? Jesus might be saying to himself, "Why should I go there again? Perhaps I should wait until at least a few people really 'get' my first appearance and embody my example in their daily lives."

Isn't Jesus supposed to be here already in some form? Isn't he present even now in the lives of his disciples, in his body the church, in the proclamation of the word and in the breaking of the bread? Didn't Jesus give us a heads-up about where we should be looking for him--among the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and the naked, the sick ones and those who are imprisoned? Or can't we bear to see Jesus this way?

However or whenever Jesus comes again,
each day is a fresh opportunity to welcome him into our lives. We should sing
the Advent hymn "O how shall I receive Thee?" throughout the liturgical year.