

It is almost December, and in the East, all of the leaves have fallen. You can fly over Tennessee, or New York, and Vermont, and below, the ground appears gray. Through stands of naked trees, you notice the soft ground, wet with leaves composting.

Just one month ago, the hills were burnt with orange, gold, and specks of Summer green.

Here, in the Bay area, imported Maples are still changing, their resignation takes longer, and you can still find leaves deep red or orange. But even here, days are shorter, shadows have lengthened, and the sky is cast grey with low-hanging clouds.

Sunny days are imposters. They promise a warmth they can't deliver. I dress in rumpled sweaters, and wear wool socks. In three weeks, Fall will become Winter.

Christmas is on the horizon. But even Christmas is yet an interloper, an imposter. For this is the surreal in-between time, the purgatory of seasons, the time God has donated to us for thinking, and not for doing.

In the old days, the crops by now were harvested, repairs made to barns, life winterized – and in the cycle of nature, there is less to do.

Sadly, we do not appreciate this time, and pretend Christmas is already here. We instead fill this space with busy-ness, so much extra, but this is creative time, time to think to learn about ourselves, and the world about us. And the pregnant question is, how can you welcome God in a manger if you won't create space?

Or, put another way, Will you miss Christmas, this year?

Jesus didn't need to tell me that two will be in the house, and one will be taken, that two would be in the field, and one will be taken.

Anyone who has lost a spouse, or a child, knows the truth of Jesus awful statement, that there were two, and now there is one.

Jesus is saying more. He is telling the disciples, You can't know when. Nobody can.

Meaning, Your knowledge is limited. There are things you do not know. Things you cannot control, truths you cannot access.

That is why you are to stay awake. Keep alert. Keep watch. You can't know everything.

Don't worry, even the Pope does not know everything.

As Americans, many of us look at Pope Benedict XVI with bewilderment, incredulous at what he says and does. At what he fails to say and do.

Do not be fooled: the Pope is not the caricature he appears to be. The Pope is not a stupid man. To the contrary, he is a very smart man.

The problem is, his world view is not an American world view. His version of reality is different from ours.

This week, the Pope acknowledged that condom use might, in fact, be a moral choice. Well – of-course it is. In sub-Saharan Africa, where HIV/AIDS has spread like wildfire, the countries that promoted condom use early-on now experience the lowest incidence of new HIV cases.

In 1998, I spent time in both Kenya and Uganda. In Uganda, my priest friend asked me to talk to his young adults about HIV/AIDS and prevention –

He recognized value in open, honest discussion. About how the disease is spread, that if you don't practice safe sex, you might die.

In Kenya, the church turned a blind eye to discussions on sex. The priests could not admit that their Christians engage in sex outside of marriage.

The Ugandan government reacted to the crisis much like my friend, and adopted an early campaign to fight the spread of HIV/AIDS by promoting safe sex. The Kenyan government did not. To this day, the incidence rate of new cases of HIV/AIDS in Uganda is significantly lower than it is in Kenya and the surrounding sub-Saharan nations.

The Pope is a little like the church in Kenya. Traditional moral ethics from the Roman Catholic Church attributes to sex only one moral purpose: procreation. Pleasure and intimacy are secondary. You don't have sex because it facilitates pleasure or intimacy. Use of condoms, and hence, preventing procreation, makes sex illicit.

You and I have a hard time understanding this logic, because in our view, sex for reasons outside of procreation is not illicit. Our view is relatively new.

Moreover, there were practical reasons for the church to take this now arcane position. Having multiple sex partners spread disease -- syphilis and gonorrhea – at a time when there were no condoms.

Sadly, the Pope cannot conceive of a God who considers sex to be a gift, something beautiful and good. But, God created the world, the love and intimacy shared among humans, and declared emphatically at creation, It is good.

Well, what does all of this have to do with Advent, and days becoming shorter, and burnt orange maple leaves?

Like I said, the Pope is not stupid. Neither are you.

The pope does not know everything. He does not have complete knowledge any more than the disciples did, to whom Jesus said plainly, you cannot know the day or hour.

You cannot know, and neither can I. We do not have complete knowledge. We don't know everything, any more than the Pope does. We don't know the ways in which our worldview is skewed, where we cannot see truth as truth, where we cling to anachronisms and half-truths.

As the Apostle Paul wrote, now we know in part and we see in part...

Both nature, and our Christian calendar, have given us this extraordinary season of contemplation. Advent, a beautiful darkness that is at once empty and full. Empty of activity, and full of expectation.

In this darkness, we look both inward, at our own inadequacy, and our need for help from outside ourselves, and to the dark heavens, for stars to light the way.

Don't become so busy with parties and shopping and decorating, that you forget to allow space. If you do, you might just miss Christmas.

You have missed it before – we all have, one year or another – but we don't have to again, this year.