The commentator William Barclay recalls a fable about three demons who were being sent by their leader Satan to destroy the human race. “How are you going to do this,” Satan asked them. The first said: “I will tell them that there is no God.” Satan responded: “You will not fool many. They know God exists.” The second said: “I will tell them there is no hell.” Satan answered: “They won’t believe you.” The third demon said: “I will tell them there is no hurry.” “Ah, that is good,” Satan replied, “you will ruin thousands.”

Do you remember the song “Manana”? I remember some of its words: “The window, she is broken, and the rain is coming in. If someone doesn’t fix it, I’ll be soaking to my skin. But if we wait a day or two, the rain will go away, and we don’t need a window on such a sunny day.” And then the refrain: “Manana, manana, manana is good enough for me.” Or was it, “… is soon enough for me”? In any case, the message is clear: “Don’t hurry!”

This theme of time is an important one for Advent. We see it in our readings for today. The first reading from Isaiah speaks of a future time when all the nations will journey to Jerusalem to learn the wisdom of God. There they will learn will be to live in peace with
each other. And so we have that famous sentence from this reading which is written on a wall of the entrance to the United Nations building in New York City: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again.” Did Isaiah think that this day would come soon? Do we, 2700 years after him, think such a day will come soon? I think not. Indeed, many Christians would say that there will always be war and that the perfect world envisioned in Isaiah’s words is not a world in time but an ideal world beyond time. And God will have to create such a world because we cannot do it on our own.

Certainly, this is a common-sense view of things. There have always been wars, and there are wars going on right now. We as a nation are at war and have been for seven years. But the situation with respect to war has changed, although our thinking about it may not have changed. In the past all wars were limited wars, but today a nuclear war might turn out to be an unlimited war which would destroy our planet. Faced with the real possibility of mutually assured destruction (mad, for short), nations might back off at the last moment, as was the case in October 1962 when President Kennedy’s warning to the Russians succeeded in bringing about the removal of their missiles from Cuban waters.
But it was close. Vatican II described nuclear war and the preparation for it, the arms race, in this way: “... the arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which injures the poor to an intolerable degree” (no. 81 in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church). It is a trap because it will lead to mutual self-destruction; it is an injury of intolerable degree for the poor because the money which should be spent on food, education and health care is spent on weapons. Let us hope that our nation and Russia will renew its arms treaty. President Obama wants to do that but some in the Senate and House are dragging their feet. I take it they feel there is no hurry.

What is also different today from the days of Isaiah is our understanding of the vastness of time. To speak of time as vast may not be correct, for vastness has to do with space, not time. But what word should we use to express what we now know but people a hundred and sixty years ago didn’t know—that our world is ancient, having a history of billions of years and not just six thousand years, as people traditionally thought? And barring a nuclear war, we all simply presume that our universe is going to be long-lived. The future ahead of us may be as long as the past behind us. So, again, there is no hurry.
But there is. And that is what the Gospel for today wants to tell us. Life will go along as it usually does in all its ordinariness. Two women will be grinding at the mill, and two men will be working together in the field, and all of a sudden there will be one woman and one man. The others will be gone. Therefore, we must stay awake. We must be prepared, for at a time we don’t know the Lord will come for us. And Paul in his letter to the Romans, our second reading for today, tells us what being awake and ready means and doesn’t mean. He describes it positively as “putting on the Lord Jesus Christ.” Negatively, he describes it as ceasing to live in drunkenness, orgies, promiscuity, rivalry and jealously. I am safe, we might be saying to ourselves. We don’t live that way. But there are other things to be looked at in our lives and evaluated as being good or bad, as being part of our putting on the Lord or as being things that lead us away from the Lord. During this season of Advent, let us ask for the grace to see the good and the bad, and the not so good, in our lives a little more clearly.