

*Sunday December 1, 2013*

## **Advent is not about certainty**

By Jim Taylor

Few comments create as much conflict in families as, “Aren’t you ready yet?” Especially if you’re waiting for the one who announced, 15 minutes earlier, “It’s about time we got ready to go.”

Waiting is hard enough when you know what you’re waiting for – a spouse, a promotion at work, a traffic jam to start moving, a political dynasty to come to an end. It’s harder when you don’t know what you’re waiting for, but you have wait for it anyway.

But that is, I suggest, the proper exercise of the traditional Advent season.

Today, the four Sundays of Advent begin a new year in the Christian church calendar. Advent ends with Christmas itself. Symbolically, it represents the thousand-year wait of the Hebrew people for their long-promised Messiah.

They were waiting for the wrong thing, unfortunately. They were looking for Superman. Perhaps not in blue tights with a big red letter on his chest, but still a Superman who could drive the hated Romans out of their lands. The Jews were supposed to be God’s chosen people, the nation who set an example for all other nations. But what kind of example constantly gets stomped on by the Babylonians, the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Macedonians, and now the Romans?

The Hebrew people certainly weren’t looking for a helpless, crying infant. Who wasn’t even born to a properly married couple in a proper home, for heaven’s sake, but in a stable! With manure on the floor. And flies. And fleas.

Who had to be parked in a feed trough instead of a crib.

No, that was definitely not what they were looking for.

## **Repeating patterns**

But it’s what we expect, isn’t it? We know already – because the Bible tells us so – that Advent ends with the birth of a baby we know as Jesus. He’s often invisible in the kaleidoscope of lights and decorations, the piles of gift-wrapped presents, the overloaded dinner tables, the aromatic evergreen trees, but he’s there, somewhere, the baby in the manger.

“Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus lays down his sweet head...”

We’re just as sure of how our waiting will end as the ancient Hebrews were sure that Superman was coming.

I wonder if we might be equally mistaken.

The whole point of the Christmas story, it seems to me, is that what you get isn’t what you were looking for. A humiliated people weren’t looking for a baby in a manger. Or for an itinerant artisan from the boonies, a wizard who performed magic tricks with jugs of water and loaves of bread, or a wimp who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey instead of a mighty war-horse.

They wanted him to throw out the Romans, not to offend their own religious leaders by turning the Temple into mass chaos. That act was equivalent to shouting “Fire!” in a crowded theatre. Hey, people could get hurt in the panic to escape....

But we’re sure that each time the Wheel of Fortune rolls around, it will always stop at the same place. The winning number always offers a free trip to Bethlehem.

## Seeing only what we expect

What makes us so sure God will always do the same thing, again and again? Maybe Advent is supposed to be waiting for something unexpected.

Waiting is never easy. You sit in the dark, staring, eyes wide open, unable to see anything. But you know, you just know, that something's coming. Is it Peter Pan's Tinker Bell? Or Maurice Sendak's Wild Things who "roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws..."

Is it a bright new day, tip-toeing towards the eastern horizon? Or is it poet W.B. Yeats' "great beast, slouching towards Bethlehem to be born"?

When we know exactly what we're looking for, we'll miss every other possibility.

I wonder how many times I missed love, because I thought she had to look like Farrah Fawcett? Missed a friendship, because I couldn't imagine it wearing a turban? Missed a moment of holiness, because I was rushing to meet a deadline?

## A lifetime of anticipation

Too bad Advent lasts less than four weeks. The Jewish people spent centuries waiting for a Messiah. If we were seriously re-enacting their experience, we should spend our entire lives in an attitude of eager anticipation.

For what? For mystery with a capital M. For something we can't possibly know about in advance. For something that we might not even recognize when it happens.

But one thing's for sure -- if we don't keep looking for it, we won't see it. Ever. The whole point of Advent is to keep looking, keep waiting, keep hoping -- for something that may be quite unexpected.

Certainty, it seems to me, contradicts the central message of Advent.

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## YOUR TURN

Most of the letters I got after last Sunday's column on Toronto Mayor Rob Ford -- who has since been named "Newsmaker of the Year by Maclean's Magazine -- jumped on Ford with both feet.

For example, Robert Caughell wrote, "To my knowledge, the Fords are millionaires due to the family business started by their father. The sister has/had drug problems. Another brother is a former convict. The Ford brothers feel entitled to do/say whatever they want and belittle/attack/threaten anyone who disagrees with them on Toronto City Council. And Rob/Doug seemed to be joined at the hip, you cannot have one without the other being close by to backup/enable the other. Rob does not take NO for an answer on anything. Anyone else, in a similar situation, would have stepped aside/resigned, but not Rob Ford. And Ford Nation, his legion of supporters, are in denial for being unwilling/unable to see Rob's faults."

Nenke Jongkind sent two letters. The first said simply, "If only you had written this for one of the Toronto papers. Not that anyone in the Ford family is ready to deal with it yet. Denial continues to be their modus operandi. It is familial and familiar."

In her second letter, Nenke elaborated on her theme: "Narcissism is not often recognized by individuals or by those who are attracted to their orbit. Add to that the anger of those who feel neglected and unheard and whom the mayor purports to represent, and you have the dilemma of our city and our mayor."

Laurina Tallman: "Rob Ford has audio-processing deficits that have been worsened by substance abuse. I have been thinking seriously about approaching him with a listening program. There is nothing unusual about his performance; we have seen similar behaviour in the spotlights that shine on celebrities in Hollywood and in New York and in other parts of the world. Increasingly, we see people in positions of public responsibility flaunting their uncontrolled behaviour and frequently getting away with it. However, we also see people without those types of responsibilities spinning in the same downward spiral lit only by the spotlight of those who love them and agonize at their destruction. If Rob Ford's ear(s) could be strengthened he would regain some measure of control over his behaviour. Whether he has ever been taught the basic values he needs to rebuild his life responsibly, I am less certain; but there are people who specialize in teaching values, pastors among them.

"Jim Coyle's article on what Rob Ford could expect in rehab is germane:  
[http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2013/11/09/rob\\_ford\\_what\\_he\\_could\\_expect\\_in\\_rehab.html](http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2013/11/09/rob_ford_what_he_could_expect_in_rehab.html)."

Dale Perkins (like my wife, incidentally) is tired of hearing about Rob Ford: "Ford is a fascinating story, but rapidly has become very old and not worth more attention. I just find him pathetic, somebody who unfortunately enjoys way too much power and influence. He should have stepped away from office a long time ago. He's provided late-night US comedians all the grist they should receive from this country. When away in Scotland and then Germany and now Africa recently, seeing his big, fat face on daily papers was simply an embarrassment. We must let the sick guy enjoy his pathologies all by himself and move on. If he actually goes for counseling help, then of course, the family system he emerged from would be of interest. But only inside a counsellor's office -- not in public.

"I appreciate Buffy Saint Marie's line -- 'the Universal soldier; he really is to blame'. A lot of us come out of strange, convoluted family systems, but that doesn't take away the necessity of each of us making good choices. And when we can make good choices in concert with others, then the community benefits."

There were a few letter writers who focussed not so much on the Ford family personally as on the challenges in counselling such people.

Isabel Gibson wrote, "I like that way of thinking about our problems -- as an enemy to be defeated -- at least as a counterweight to our tendency to wallow in guilt and do nothing. Maybe it will make denial easier to overcome."

Charles Hill, who has done a lot of counselling himself, wrote, "I really liked your 'Guilt Trip' comment!"

Mike Crockett lives in Solihull, U.K., so he doesn't have to deal directly with the Rob Ford circus. But he said he found the column helpful: "This has come just hours before I set out to talk to a group about generational toxicity - how we might break the cycle we were born into."

And Constance St. Hilaire from Cape Cod put denial into a larger context: "I know that you were writing about personal denial, Jim, but I was reminded of the many ways that we all are in denial of the depth of the economic imbalance, the willing ignorance, the abuse of the environment. All most of us want is our personal comfort and not too much trouble as we go through life, with a little joy now and then. So we either tell ourselves it is not so bad, or that we cannot solve the problem alone so why try to do anything? Maybe we are all addicted to physical comfort and we need to be more concerned about moral comfort. Isn't it the role of the churches to be our moral counselor?"

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TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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#### PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, [www.seemslikegod.org](http://www.seemslikegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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