

Wednesday December 17, 2012

Looking ahead to the end of the world

By Jim Taylor

The news story said that Chris Hadfield might be the only Canadian to survive the end of the world. He blasts off today, for a five-month stint in the International Space Station. So if doomsday occurs this Friday, when the 5125-year “Long Count” of the Mayan calendar runs out, Hadfield might witness the disintegration of this small blue marble floating in space.

Not that he’d survive very long, of course. The space station orbits on the tether of Earth’s gravity. No Earth, no gravity. Freed from its gravitational leash, the space station will soar off into space like a rock from David’s sling.

Deer in the headlights

Strange, isn’t it, this fascination we have with end times?

When the year 2000 loomed, people stockpiled survival goods. Headed for the hills. Expected massive computer crashes, earthquakes, volcanoes...

Me, I merely quit flossing. Why protect my teeth if they’ll cease to exist in a few days anyway?

Now the same fears erupt over a Mayan mathematical algorithm based on multiplying 18’s and 20’s. In Russia, they’re buying candles, for the coming darkness. In California, they’re headed for underground bunkers. In France, they’re expecting extra-terrestrial aliens to launch off a mountain top.

And if that’s not enough disaster, some doomsayers claim an invisible planet named Nibiru will emerge from its hiding place behind the sun and smash Earth to smithereens. Or a black hole will extend a tentacle through the galaxies and suck Earth into oblivion. Earthquakes will trigger tsunamis big enough to swamp the Himalayas....

What is it about the “end of an age” that enrages some people to wallow gleefully in potential calamities? And that causes other people to visualize supernatural solutions to all our problems?

The Mayans themselves never made any predictions about the world turning over a new leaf when their Long Count ended. Our reactions “tell us more about ourselves than about the ancient Maya,” said Geoffrey Braswell, a professor of anthropology in San Diego.

Angels and other things

For several weeks, I’ve received spam e-mails which assure me that on December 21 the skies will be filled with celestial beings. They will take the administration of this world out of our obviously fallible hands. They will inaugurate a brand new cycle of justice, peace, and universal goodwill.

It sounds strangely like a scene on a field outside Bethlehem, 20 centuries ago. Where a celestial being declared, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy...” And a chorus of similar beings sang, “Glory to God, and on Earth peace and goodwill...”

And a new star blazed in the sky that night, marking the birth of a king expected to overthrow corrupt dynasties and rule forever with justice and peace.

Notice any similarities?

No doubt that supernova, or whatever it was, invoked a host of apocalyptic fears too. They haven’t survived. Only the “good news” did.

Now I wonder why many of us want to treat the Mayan calendar as a turning point of history, but ignore the significance of a real turning point that we celebrate each Christmas.

Whether we view the future as impending disaster or as promise is our choice. Every day. Not just on December 21 or December 25.

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YOUR TURN

"The best Advent sermon I encountered this year," Jim Henderschedt wrote about last week's column, on waiting in hope. Thank you, Jim.

Isabel Gibson added her own insights: "Like belief and doubt ('Lord, we believe, help Thou our unbelief'), maybe hope and fear are natural companions. If that's so, what poisons hope, then, is not the fear but the 'giving in' to it -- the act of despairing. Those who despair wait for nothing. Those who wait, hope."

Ralph Milton took his own angle on my theme: "Your Soft Edges prompted a small memory from our trip to the coast. We took the Sky train from the airport to New West. In the airport we asked a man where to catch the Canada Line. He walked us over to a better viewpoint where we could see down the corridor leading to it. On the train platform I had trouble with the machine that sells the tickets. A woman standing nearby came to our rescue, asked where we were going, and got the tickets for us. When we got on the train, two young men gave their seats to us. When we changed trains, two young women did likewise. At the station at the other end, a man carried a suitcase up the stairs for us. All those people went just a little beyond what politeness requires. All of them smiled as they did it. All of them helped renew my faith that humans are fundamentally good."

Clare Neufeld said he didn't want "to quibble over details" but then went on to take a different look at one of my illustrations: "I read somewhere, (so long ago, I cannot give credit to author, nor appropriate reference), that dogs, (and maybe cats, etc?) have no sense of time. So the suggestion might be that instead of feeling hope, for a feeding, etc., it is more likely their dependency on your sense of responsibilities, to actually feed them?"

No, Clare, I think they know very well, within about 15 minutes accuracy, when they should be fed. And they remind us, quite insistently, no matter how much I tell them to Go A-Way!

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The Revised Common Lectionary suggests an alternate for the Psalm Reading for Advent r – either Mary's *Magnificat* from Luke 1, or Psalm 80:1-7. I can see the reasoning for Psalm 80, but I chose to go with Mary's song of pregnancy.

My body grows round with wonder;

my soul swells with thanksgiving.

For God has been so good to me;

God did not say, "She's just a girl."

Once I was a slip of a girl,
but now I am woman,
one who can bring forth new life.
In all generations, I am blessed.
How could anyone miss it --
this new life in me is divine.
It is holy.
God grants new life to all who have not lost a child's wonder;
they will be born again, and again, and again.
God watches over them;
God's fierce love fills predators with sudden fear.
The miracle of birth levels our human differences:
tough men become tenderly gentle,
learned professors blurt out baby talk,
even politicians fall silent in awe.
But the small and helpless are wrapped warmly in soft blankets;
they are held lovingly in caring arms;
they drink their fill with eyes closed.
The rich, for all their wealth and status, can go suck lemons.
That is how God deals with all of God's faithful people,
all who do not put their faith in themselves.
So God has always done,
so God will always do,
from Sarah's miracle, to mine.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications,
info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to:

<http://www.hymnsight.ca> www.hymnsight.ca

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for those who are new to the idea of using projected visuals in church, and for those who have already begun.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look to see if this service scratches where you itch. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,

Ralph Milton

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to 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 web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. [<http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>](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 to get onto her mailing list.

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

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
