

*Wednesday December 12, 2012*

## **Waiting in the dark for a birth**

By Jim Taylor

In the Christian church, this is the Season of Advent – a time of waiting for something that hasn't happened yet.

The thing we're expecting, of course, is the birth of Jesus, the Christ. Which makes Advent a bit self-contradictory. Because if it hadn't happened yet, we wouldn't be gathering in churches called "Christian."

And if it hadn't happened yet, then we would have to believe we're living in a world which has not yet discovered God embodied among us.

A world without God?

Many people might say that we already live in a godless world. Shoppers frantically run up their credit limits. Fraud artists bilk seniors of their savings. Corporations cut safety corners, and market tainted or dangerous products to gullible consumers. National leaders kill their own people, or target suspected terrorists with drones and assassination squads....

It's a dog-eat-dog world, they'd say. Survival of the fittest. Get real, buster!

I'm not convinced.

## **Four Sundays, four virtues**

In my tradition, the four Sundays of Advent usually have themes -- Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. They're virtues we practice, in anticipation of the coming (once again) of the Christ presence. They're not the only possible virtues, of course; I might like to add Reason, Intelligence, Honesty, Health...

Still, those four virtues make a good place to start.

I think I know how to live lovingly. So, incidentally, does my dog. She gives me unconditional love, even adoration. I struggle to live up to her example – with her, and with my fellow humans.

She also embodies joy – just watch her dancing at the door as we prepare to go out for a winter walk. Would that I could be as openly joyful.

And peace? Is anything more peaceful than a dog snoozing in a pool of sunlight? Well, maybe a cat curled up in my lap. I try to emulate their peacefulness.

But do animals know hope? Hope is harder to express. They know short-term hope, certainly. My dog hopes we'll come home, that I'll feed her, that I'll throw a ball for her to retrieve...

Long-term hope, I'm less sure of. Does a maltreated dog hope for a more compassionate home? Do egg-factory chickens hope for a free-range future? Do cattle herded towards the slaughterhouse hope for greener pastures?

It's hard to tell. Even I, supposedly a more intelligent creature, don't know how my way of living might demonstrate hope.

## **The shadow side**

Of course, hope has its opposite, its shadow side. I have no doubt that animals experience fear. A beaten dog cowers before the stick. Cattle panic. Even flocks of quail – possibly the only creatures whose collective IQ dips below zero – scatter wildly before an onrushing car.

If animals can feel fear, perhaps they can also feel hope. Even if it's not physically evidenced in their behaviour.

And that, strangely, gives me hope. Perhaps, as I look forward once more for a night when holiness is again embodied among us, living hopefully is not so much about what I do or say, but about the quality of my waiting.

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## YOUR TURN

Several of the comments on last week's column, wondering why prayers had to be uttered by the professional priest or minister to be considered valid, were quite short.

For instance, Jack Dreidger wrote, "I have a very personal relationship with God. Prayer is a very private matter between God and me."

And Allan Baker said, "Good to read about a minister who listened!"

Art Borle commented, "I know not what faith you follow, but I will tell you that in my faith, the prayers of the people are never repeated by the Priest -- and from that you probably know what faith I belong to! I agree, once said why should they be repeated?"

John Wilson shared his own experience: "I assume the reason the minister repeated the specific prayer requests from the people was to ensure that everyone had heard what was being said and perhaps could then respond to the particular needs. I am retired, but I know when I was leading worship, I was not always clear on what was being said in the prayer requests from the congregation. Since I was not always sure I had heard it correctly, I did not dare try to repeat it.

"Either way God hears the prayers."

Jean Hamilton probed the implicit differences between priest and minister: "Those of us who were formed in 'traditional' United Church congregations understood that the minister, during the pastoral prayer, gathered up the concerns, joys, and sorrows of the people and on their behalf, presented them to God. (Obviously, this assumed an intimate knowledge of the congregation, which may or may not have existed.) The United Church has never been entirely comfortable with this priestly function, as evidenced by the number of task forces on ministry that have been in existence since 1968, all of which struggled with the question: if you recognize the ministry of the laity, what does this imply for ordination? We seem to have settled on a compromise that says there is one ministry, the ministry of Jesus Christ, which is shared by both clergy and laity. In other words, there is lots of ministry to go around.

"While no-one would argue with that, it completely evades the questions of power, status, function, and so on and on.

"So we come back to the question: are there times when we want or need our clergy to be priests? Has the question changed in light of the number of church closings, part-time ministries, proliferation of 'orders' of ministry? And how has this changed with increasing numbers of women in ministry? Do they do things differently? If so, how?

"It would be interesting to find out whether answers to these questions would meet with the same resistance that some of the task force reports met. Or...are these all in-house concerns and should we be spending our time on questions more relevant to the hurting world?"

I'm going to withhold this writer's name, in case her comments could come back to bite her: "You've touched one of my nerves with this column. The people of the rural pastoral charges I serve have been brainwashed into believing that if the minister doesn't do the praying, the praying isn't done correctly. Whether it's prayer for worship, prayer for pot-lucks, prayer for special events (wider community or faith community) or prayer at a bedside, the minister is the sole conduit (the people seem to believe) between them and God. For months I tried to get participation going with the People's Prayers, with little to no success. I even had the idea that I could do a prayer-writing workshop and have the 'people' take ownership of the Prayers of the People.

"If we're going to call it 'prayers of the people', then I think the 'people' could/should be involved (otherwise, to my mind, it's a 'pastoral' prayer, the minister's prayer). I was told: 'We want the minister to pray and we'll listen'. While I believe that prayer is a personal thing and doesn't have to be spoken aloud by the people to qualify as the people's prayer, nonetheless, when the people pray my experience is that there is a powerful sense by

all of great solidarity, support, strength, and more. I simply do not believe that the minister should be the sole prayer in a community of faith.....or that s/he is the only one who knows how to pray!

“Which leads me to one more comment: there are ministers out there who seem to have the idea that everything that is done and said (including prayer) is their sole right and responsibility within the community they serve. My response? Not printable!”

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## PSALM PARAPHRASES

Here's a variant on Isaiah 12:2-6

- 2 God has rescued us from our arid deserts;  
Nothing terrifies me any more.  
I sing of the God who gives us living water.
- 3 From the deepest recesses of our souls, celebration gushes forth,
- 4 It spills out across an anguished land  
as an awed people pour out praises.
- 5 Their voices rise, like water in the well:  
"Glory to God, who creates springs of life  
in the deserts of death."
- 6 So let praise pour out like living water  
from the well in our midst,  
the well that is our God.

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

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## 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](http://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

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## 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](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 web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto: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](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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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 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](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca), or send a note to [sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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