

“The Great Advent-ure”

This past summer when world leaders came to Canada for the G 8 and G20 conferences our jaws dropped at the billion dollar price tag for the three day event. But the reality is whenever world leaders arrive, security fences go up, airspace is closed. There are helicopter and dozens of snipers on the roof tops. The dignitaries travel in armour-plated limousines.

And of course, we all guffawed at the \$45,000 “Fake Lake” constructed indoors complete with real water, deck chairs and canoes so that our VIP guests would not have to leave their security bubble. But wouldn’t it have been so much better if they could’ve each actually taken a canoe and actually have gone on a wilderness adventure? Not possible, I guess, but inside the diplomatic bubble everything’s fake – even the friendliness. In fact, not to be out done, Japan when they hosted the event not only had a fake lake, it even had fake *water*, *virtual* fish.

According to the RCMP, “The security provided to world leaders when they come to our country must be *“accurate and proper for the profile the leaders have around the world.”* And so, all told, the policing and security cost us over a billion dollars.

But how ironic that when the King of Kings arrived, there was absolutely no security in place – at least none that could be *seen*. He spent the first night in an animal shelter. No secret service agents, nowhere to sleep except in a feed trough. Yet the arrival on Earth of the ultimate dignitary, the one *world figure* whose arrival was so earth-shaking that the year of his birth now divides the historical time-line into B.C. and A.D. was an event witnessed by more four footed animals than people. That night, an unruly donkey could have easily slipped free from its tether and stepped on him. He could have picked up e-coli from the manure – strange accommodations to say the least! Looking back, we might be tempted to say *“Absolutely inaccurate and totally improper for the profile that Jesus Christ now has around the world.* But that was then, this is now.

In Bethlehem there was no security, no luxury suite, no state dinner; yet preparations for his arrival were none less *very elaborate*. Plans had been underway for *centuries*. A people had been chosen to be *his* people. Their prophets had spoken of it for generations. And this people had longed for this DAY. History had unfolded in just the right way. All the stars had aligned just right. No mistake here: no bungled arrangements, every aspect of the arrival timed right down to the second so the Son of God could slip quietly through the back door of our world. So . . .

Cue the angels

Light, camera, action! Let the adventure begin! Meanwhile, as the newborn Jesus shivers in his manger, in another little Judean town not too far away, another little baby lies kicking in his cradle. His name is *John* and one day he will preach to the massive crowds. All Israel will gather around him along banks of the historic Jordan River, the same Jordan River where at the end of a forty year wilderness adventure Israel would marshal their multitudes to begin to enter the promise land. No coincidence about John’s choice of venue. A new Exodus is about to begin. A “kingdom of God” movement has formed around John, and now, all they need is the king. And one day John would pick his face out of the crowd and announce to the gathered multitudes that standing in their midst is the most important person in the history of the world. This is the Advent of Jesus the Christ.

This story comes from Esther Vogt who tells of how before renovations were done at her church they had lacked adequate restroom facilities. One Sunday, as the pastor preached about

John the Baptizer, he couldn't figure out why the congregation was snickering. But he'd made the solemn declaration: "*What this church needs is more Johns.*"

But its *true* isn't it? This church, *any* church, this *world* desperately needs a more people as devoted and as daring and as decisive as was John. If only one clear prophetic voice like his could rise above the babble of extremist religion and political rhetoric and popular culture that seem to form the mix of much of contemporary Christianity! For it's still the Christian belief that in and through Jesus the kingdom of God is coming into this world. *How shall we "cross over that Jordan? How shall we enter the new promised land of God's kingdom? How does one prepare the way of the Lord?* That challenge given by John Jordan's bank rings in our ears . . .

" Prepare Ye the way of the Lord!"

And year after year, century after century it comes to generation after generation. Prepare! What is the state of Christianity in our world today? Not just my little bit or yours, but the thing itself, what we might call the capital "C" Church. What we will pass on to the generations to come? What is the state of *preparedness* of the Church in present day to receive her King in a way "accurate and proper for the profile he has around the world? Will the Church that we leave behind for our children be well equipped to the spread the Gospel accurately, properly? Or will we leave a Christianity that's hobbled? Beat up? Polluted? A mix of extremist religion, political rhetoric and popular culture. These are John the Baptizer questions, these are the whole life questions, community questions, national questions, questions of *global* concern. And to answer them we must come back to John himself, who paved the way for the *first* royal visit of the Son of God to earth.

The thing that strikes immediately us about John was . . .

His gift of spiritual discernment.

John the Baptizer was the trumpet-blowing herald sent ahead of the king announcing the arrival of a hitherto unknown *Jesus of Nazareth*. And John says, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" What did that mean to those people on the banks of Jordan? Well, remember the Passover story? Lamb's blood on the doorposts so the death angel would pass them over. This is the new Exodus, Jesus the new leader, the Moses, the Messiah, the KING!

Really? This one? Him? John, are you sure?"

"Yes."

John, you see, had been chosen for this from his mother's womb, prepared from his youth to *hear* at the moment of Jesus's baptism a voice from heaven declaring "This is my Son. . ." to *see* in the Jordan waters the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus as dove . . .

But what if you got it wrong? What if it was, after all, a momentary black-out, a dizzy spell, a bit of heat-stroke? How can one really be sure a visionary phenomena is really what we think it is? But John was prepared. His life from the day he was born had been attuned to Word of God. We wonder, did his aged parents live long enough to see him grow to manhood? Did they manage to pass on to him their vibrant spirituality? Their knowledge of the Scripture? If not, who *were* his teachers?

John seems to have followed a austere spiritual path of spiritual life similar to that of the Essenes, a community of Jews who gave us the famous Dead Sea Scrolls. The Essenes retreated into the desert to purify their hearts and minds and prepare for the Kingdom of God. And although there is no evidence John had any connection with such a community, he must have

been the product of a dedicated spiritual community who had prepared him to fulfill this immense duty. He would be ready when the time came to *recognize* Jesus as God's Son.

But apart from any human instrumentality, the Bible tells us John was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. He was a "scan button" on a car radio, searching from station to station until you hear just the right music or tone of a familiar announcer's voice, then you lock on to that station. John was born for the unique purpose of scanning the faces of Israel until he spotted "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world".

Being a prophet must be really an amazing job (-- that is if you can manage to keep your *head* about you). But how exciting! To live in the moment with God. To speak a word that no one's ever heard before. To be at the very forefront of God's revelation in your day. What a great adventure! John was a *great* prophet and crowds came to hear him because they *believed* that *he* was saying *was* from God. And many in Israel responded in faith and joined this new "kingdom of God" movement.

But others wouldn't go there. After all, positions of authority were at stake, personal income might be jeopardized. There was the fear of being judged a heretic. And this would eventually spell trouble for John. Looking back, from our standpoint, we can *see* now how reasonable and sane and holy John was. But at the time, a lot of people, especially those within the religious establishment, viewed the wild-eyed wilderness preacher with the greatest of suspicion. He must have seemed way too extreme – a dangerous fanatic. After all, who in their right mind would pour fuel on a hot-bed of Jewish revolt by saying the Messiah is now among them? If that wasn't true, it would be the most incredibly irresponsible act. But what if it was true? This was the beginning of the new beginning. The Great Adventure.

In a strange way, John reminds me of the movie. . .

UP

UP is the story of Carl Fredricksen, a shy and quiet young boy, who meets an energetic and outgoing bucktoothed barefooted tomboy named Ellie. They immediately discover they share the same interest in exploration. They want to be explorers and they adopt as their explorer club motto: "Adventure is Out There!" Ellie has set her heart on moving her clubhouse to Paradise Falls in South America, a promise she makes Carl vow to keep. Carl and Ellie grow up and wed and grow old together in the old house where they first met while he makes a living as a balloon vendor and zookeeper. Unable to have children, they try to save up for the trip to Paradise Falls but other financial obligations keep intervening and they just never seem to be able to take their trip.

Ellie dies of old age, leaving Carl living alone in their home as a sour recluse with nothing to live for and missing his wife terribly. Then Carl comes up with a scheme to *keep* his promise to Ellie, and uses his old professional supplies to create a makeshift airship using tens of thousands of helium balloons that lift his house off its foundations. UP he goes and sets his course for Paradise Falls.

At last he finally stepped out. He finally crossed the line, put the dream into action.

If God really did visit earth in the birth of Jesus, and if he rose again, ascended to the Father, and by his Holy Spirit his kingdom continues to come to earth, what might hold us back from *living* into that reality? Adventure is out there!

So why are we afraid to go? Why so reluctant to openly embrace adventure's call? It should be like Star Trek: "To boldly go where no one has gone before..."

Our world full of totally misguided people who are totally passionate for their causes, their religions, their leaders. The sincere faith of boundless youth is subverted, misplaced and

wasted every day. O, yes, there is a danger of leaping out into a misguided or even *wasted* life. But probably more common is the terrible near fate that awaited our hero, Carl Fredrickson — until he finally realized that Adventure is Out There! It was “now or never”, so he filled his balloons and went UP.

John the Baptizer was *no* misguided jihadist. He was a man sent from God. He was simply one man who was willing to boldly go where no one has gone before. “John,” said Jesus, “was not like a “reed shaken by the wind.” (7). In other words, he was a man who *made up his mind*. How do we prepare for *this Great Advent-ure*? Certainly *not* by tying balloons to our houses. But this world *does* “need more Johns.” Maybe *we* need to join the Explorer Club, become people who actually leave the bubble and actually GO *exploring*, praying, searching the Scriptures and scanning face of humanity in search of a genuine encounter with God.

But we all face Carl Fredrickson’s dilemma. We have, after all, real jobs, kids to feed, bills to pay . . . But isn’t that exactly the point? We want real life, not fake life inside the bubble.

So John was giving the nation . . .

A reality check.

The Jewish people addressed by John and Jesus were seething with anger. Theirs was a land of constant revolts and uprisings and bandits. The Roman Empire was slow poison crushing them with debt, oppressing them with fear and threatening them with violence. The *reality* was, as they gathered on the banks of Jordan, the Israelites were in *slavery* again to a new Pharaoh. As it was in Egypt, the Roman commercializing empire was demanding more and more bricks per day — and O, yes, from now on you gather your own straw. They were a people about to be broken. Their greatest need was for liberation. What Israel needed most was not hope in a blissful after life, they needed and expected freedom NOW. They needed and expected Messiah to set them free. When would God restore his kingdom to Israel? Maybe John was the one . . . ?

So every one and his pet donkey went out to the desert to get, at least one good look at John. And why not? He was certainly a sight: windswept curls, camel hair robe and leather belt. . . . But a man in touch with the Israel’s God. The folks who came to John at the Jordan were not just poor and politically oppressed, they were painfully unaware of their *spiritual* need. They’d been taking rainchecks on reality for far too long. But with John, there was finally a glimmer of hope. Perhaps the kingdom of God *was* finally about to come. Maybe, soon, God would raise up his Messiah and lead his people out of this. But according to John, it was time to repent for not everyone was convinced. There were those John called . . .

“The brood of vipers.”

He could always spot them — the meticulous religious types, the ones more concerned with proper performance, tranquil rituals conducted by fully authorized personnel behind the sacred walls. But these people don’t seem concerned in the least with the lack of justice in their streets, the hunger the sickness, the social cost of the tax burden or the iron fist of Roman rule. In fact this “brood” seemed to really thrive on all that. Repent? Why? We’re quite comfortable and rich and we see that as proof of God’s blessing our their lives.

John has news for them who believe that just because they are descendants of Abraham, they automatically qualify for admission into God’s kingdom. But they’re the *minority*.

The vast majority are just common folk come from villages around Jerusalem. Their day to day life on the farm or fishing boat or turning a potter's wheel has little or nothing to do with the complex workings of the Jerusalem Temple. For them, obedience to God is *pretty straightforward* : go to synagogue, a quick run through of the ten commandments, a prayer before each meal, good sprinkling of the Proverbs of Solomon as they go about their tasks.

But everyone lives under the dark shadow of Rome and Herod, and there was a great tensions about this among the Jews about this. They fought Jew against Jew over who was best at following Torah. Hot-heads in constant turmoil. And any talk of Messiah was like throwing gas on the fire. Messiahs came and went. It was no wonder that people like John and Jesus were eventually suppressed so brutally by the Jewish rulers. But now the time had come.

If they don't get in touch with the *reality* of God's kingdom come in Jesus, there would be consequences. And history shows, the Jews of Jesus's day would *for the most part fail* the reality check. They *would* reject and crucify Jesus. But on the cross God's judgement would fall on Jesus. He would bear it on their behalf. And with the passing of time God would vindicate Jesus and the church would be the New Testament People of God and history would be the judge of their city and Temple.

Here a reality check for Canada NOW:

What if I said that Jesus is the basis of all spiritual reality. What if I said if you want to know what God is like, just look at Jesus. *Some may be upset that I make that statement. Because I think North American culture is in a state of spiritual crisis.*

Toronto-based author Ron Graham, who has written books on history, politics and religion, puts it this way: "Modern North American culture, shaped by extended periods of prosperity and peace has been remarkably successful in suppressing the reality of death. We banish our chronically ill to institutions. We lock ourselves behind alarm systems in gated communities. We dream up Star Wars shields to protect our continent from foreign missiles. Naively safe, we dwell in a fool's paradise of eternal youth. Octogenarians are given heart bypasses and Viagra to keep them spry. Middle-aged dads dress and sport like their teenage sons. The moms seek to disguise their years with facelifts and liposuction.

Maybe we're living inside a bubble of unreality. Maybe we're more prepared against a terrorist attack, but are we any more ready for the Great Advent-ure? Could it be that we *know* there's something missing in our lives and in our culture, and no matter how we pride ourselves in our enlightened values and our civic freedoms, are we really *free*? *Or are have we become basically slaves of some new incarnation of Egypt or Rome?* Year after year we put off the quest for the HOLY to pursue our busy lives. I know I need to deepen my spiritual life," we say, "but can I take a raincheck on that?"

But John reminds us we afford to delay. We must not take a raincheck on reality. At Christmastime we like to sing carols and be joyful. But unless we really *prepare our hearts*, we will not have a deep experience of Jesus Christ. It's time to fill the balloons! And it all starts with :

The awesome truth that we matter

Put yourself in John's sandals. In Matthew 11, he's in prison and will soon face death at the hands of a capricious royal family – beheaded at the vicious whim of Herod's wife. I think he knows it. He's spoken against her and he knows she will eventually demand her pound of flesh.

So John really begins to wonder: “Do I matter? Did anything I said or did really make any difference?”

Jesus dispels that doubt by pointing John towards the *works* that now are going on: miracles, preaching, the sharing of God’s love and forgiveness to even the worst of sinners. People matter to God, John, *you* matter.

But I guess John, and all the Jews, had really been expecting with the coming of Messiah *the sledgehammer of God* to pulverize the wicked. Messiah was supposed to bring about some sort of drastic cosmic action. But Jesus reminds John the mission of Messiah is PEACE ON EARTH -- deliverance and forgiveness. There was mighty kingdom work being done! There was healing and the alleviation of poverty. People were learning how to love their neighbour.

You see, Jesus a few a few Bible verses back to John in prison – encouragement from Isaiah the prophet describing the reign of the so called PRINCE OF PEACE.

Isaiah 35:5, 6 and 61:1,2.

There are Christians today still waiting for “*the sledgehammer of God.*” That’s how they see it. That’s what they think this world really needs. But Jesus suggests a totally different scenario. He didn’t come primarily to judge and punish the evildoers; he came to *save* our world from ruin -- to forgive our sin. He came to tell each man, woman and child, *you are someone that matters to God. God loves you.*

So I imagine John, when they came into his cell.

“What did Jesus say?”

Read Mat 11:4-5

After his friends leave and he’s alone in his cell, chained to the wall, he starts to do a little reality check of his own: he thinks back on all he has seen and heard and preached. It has not been in vain. Jesus IS the one we’ve been waiting for. Yes, John will die, but he will die knowing that his life *mattered.*

If we do a reality check, we too will realize that we matter.

“Adventure is Out There!”

But where to start?

Stockpiling balloons and helium tanks and rolls of twine? No, but . . .

Here’s a good place: A simple prayer: “Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven .”

‘Ever wondered what that prayer really entails?

For God’s kingdom come” *meant* something very definite to John, to the first original followers of Christ. They were a royal entourage – walking around with the KING. “Your kingdom come” is going to mean something a little different for us who are now preparing for his *next* royal visit? So . . .

What is the future of the Church

How do we *get* out of the bubble? Or will we while away our lives *inside*, sitting around a fake lake on deck chairs, but never engaging in the adventure. Adventure is out there, but how do we get out there? Bible Scholar Tom Wright offers this analogy:

Suppose somewhere in the dusty attic of a Tudor Manner house in the English countryside someone discovers the manuscript of a play signed with the name “William Shakespeare”. Literary and handwriting experts are called in and an ink smudged fingerprint on the side of a page proves beyond a shadow of a doubt it is indeed an authentic but hitherto unknown work of Will Shakespeare himself. It’s got all the style and language, it’s the real deal. But one problem: there are only four acts. Act Five is missing. The play is unfinished. It’s either

been lost, or was never completed in the first place. . .

But the play begs for a conclusion. A longing world demands that it be performed. So a group is assembled from the finest Shakespeare scholars and Shakespearean actors – those who best know and love every other works of the bard. And these people take the unfinished play soak themselves in the first four acts of the play. They study it's plot, the sub-plots, they research the characters, the recreate historical context of the play. And of course they do this seek to answer one fundemental question: if Shakespeare *had* finished this play, how would it have all turned out? And when they are ready, they produce the play and then perform it.

The church has been an unfinished play – a play in five acts, written by God yet left *unfinished*: Act One, creation, Act Two: the Fall, Act three: The Story of Isreal, Act Four Jesus born in Bethlehem, lives, dies on the cross rises on the third day and ascends into heaven leaving his apostles with the unfinished task of Act Five: the Church in the world. I guess that's why they call the book after the Gospels ACTS of the apostles.

We are the actors called upon to soak ourselves in this story, study these various characters: the pregnant virgin, the bewildered fiancee, evil king off stage, shepherds, wisemen, angels, the cast goes on an on: wild-eyed prophet, lepers, blind men, priests and scribes, Roman soldiers, undertakers astonished witnesses to the risen Jesus, ascended Lord. So now what?

A Little Christmas Spirit – that's Spirit with a Capital "S"

You see the amazing thing about the Christmas story is it is unfinished. Jesus continues to be "born is us. It is *literally possible to continue the story* for the Spirit of Jesus lives n us and *people matter to him*.

"Adventure is Out There!"

Just a prayer away: Your Kingdom Come.

Please promise me you'll never pray that flippantly – because we're actually telling God we're willing to finish the story.

We're ready to inflate the balloons and then cut the rope. Take the leap of into uncharted territory.

A poem was sent to the famous advice columnist Dear Abby from a couple who had too much stuff. and sent this a letter to their friends:

So many of you asked us (since Yuletide's drawing near)

"What do you want for Christmas?"

What can we give you this year?

If we say, "We want nothing!" you buy something anyway,

So here's a list of what we'd like; believe now what we say:

Pajamas for a little child, food to feed the poor.

Blankets for a shelter, and we ask a little bit more--

Perform good deeds and let us know, or volunteer your time.

These last are worth a fortune, and they needn't cost a dime.

We have too many things now, vases, candles, tapes and clocks.

We have our fill of garments, ties, underwear and socks.

Candy is too fattening, crossword books we've more than 20.

We don't need trays or plates or cups, and knickknacks we have plenty.

We've no walls to hang more pictures; we have books we've not yet read;

*So please take what you'd spend on us and help the poor instead!
Just send a Christmas card to us and tell us what you've done;
We'll open them on Christmas Eve, and read them one by one.
It won't cost as much for postage as a package sent would do,
You'll need no wrapping paper, ribbons, ink or glue.
And we'll thank God you listened to what we had to say,
So we could be the instruments to help someone this way*