

What does a piece of paper folded into an airplane shape and a ball with holes have in common? They join other popular toys this year in the National Toy Hall of Fame. Ever played with a Wiffle Ball? It was invented 60 years ago by a retired semi-pro baseball player whose son got frustrated playing ball in their small backyard and breaking too many windows. The lightweight ball with holes slowed down the velocity of the ball, allowing many more children to enjoy this backyard sport.¹

No one knows who formed the first paper airplane and tossed it across the room, though inventor Leonardo Da Vinci created flying machines out of parchment in the 15th century, so maybe he's the first to make a paper airplane.

These two toys from past years joined the hall of fame along with three of my favorite childhood toys: the board game Clue, those little Matchbox cars, and the card game Uno. I still have my Matchbox cars, which might be worth something these days, and Elina and Jenneley have discovered the joy of playing another of the hall of fame game: Uno.

These toys might seem like such simple toys in comparison to all the electronic gadgets in today's stores—toys that beep, light up, talk, move, and move across the computer screen. Favorite toys and games of the past may get overlooked compared to all the flashy gadgets today, but I still think there's nothing better than sitting as a family around the table with a deck of cards or a board game.

Sometimes, though, the flashy gadgets get all the attention, which is what King Nebuchadnezzar wanted to happen when he created a 30-yard tall golden statue of himself in Babylon and ordered everyone to bow down and worship it. Three followers of God—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—refused to worship the statue and faced the consequences of being thrown into a furnace of fire. They placed their hope in God, who they trusted would keep them safe, even in the face of danger. Before being thrown into the fire, they told the king, “Your threat means nothing to us. If you throw us in the fire, the God we serve can rescue us from your roaring furnace and anything else you might cook up, O king. But even if he doesn't, it wouldn't make a bit of difference, O

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king. We still wouldn't serve your gods or worship the gold statue you set up."²

You and I might not face the temptation to bow down and worship the statue of a king or face being thrown into a fire, but I think we still face temptations to worship things in place of God, especially during this holiday season. Commercials and ads try and convince us to bow down and worship consumerism, telling us we need the latest gadgets that glitter to be truly happy and successful and popular.

Recently I began looking for a new cell phone, for my current one is beginning to have problems. I couldn't believe the prices of new phones, and the sales rep explained that by paying so much money I could be part of a plan to get a new phone every year. I said, "I don't want a new phone every year," and then told her how long I've had my current phone. She looked at me with a blank stare, probably wondering what planet I had come from.

You've probably seen the ads that try to convince us to get voice activated devices to automat our homes, so that all we need to do is say "Turn on

lights" or "Buy me such and such," and the gadget follows our commands.

One advocate of such devices has even created a religion that worships Artificial Intelligence, often called AI. A new religion called "Way of the Future" was established this past May, "focusing on 'the realization, acceptance, and worship of a Godhead based on Artificial Intelligence' that followers believe will eventually surpass human control over Earth." The nonprofit group will "fund research to help create the AI that will eventually become the religion's Godhead."³

We've become so used to worshipping the golden statue that we don't even recognize it's there. I am a fan of new technology, but when it becomes the object we worship, we've gone too far. When we place our hope in technology and consumerism, we begin to see them as the measure of our success and status. We become captivated by the glitter of golden statues that beg us to bow down and worship them.

In the book of Daniel, when the three friends refused to bow down and worship the golden statue of the king and faced the fiery furnace, they

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encountered an unexpected surprise, for God sent an angel among them to protect them. They discovered that God had not abandoned them when they faced the fiery furnace, and when they were released unharmed, they discovered another unexpected surprise: the king granted permission for everyone in the kingdom to worship God rather than his golden statue. The cold, ruthless tyrant became a follower of God rather than demanding worship of himself.

Sometimes we just might discover an Advent surprise during the holiday season, when our hopes for stuff become transformed into our hopes for caring for one another, as was the case with one family where a mother received an unexpected Advent surprise from her children.

A mother was sick and tired of hearing her children always telling her what they wanted Santa to bring them. On one such occasion she reminded them of the real meaning of Christmas—Christmas is a time of giving and not receiving.

The children could tell that Mom really believed what sounded like absolute nonsense to

them. They secretly met and tried to figure out what was going through their mother's head. They finally came to a conclusion as to what must be done.

They went to their mother in a very concerned manner. The oldest child acted as the spokesperson: "Mom, we've been thinking about what you told us about how important it is to give at Christmas; with all of our talk about Santa, you must have felt left out. We don't want you to feel this way, Mom. So I'll tell you what we have decided to do. Santa doesn't have to get us all the presents; if you want to get us some, too, we're going to let you!"⁴

Advent is more than waiting for presents, for it is a time of waiting for the surprising news of God's entrance into the world through the birth of a baby—who would have ever expected that?

Advent is a time when in the midst of the busy and hectic season, that we find a surprising sense of hope.

One writer suggested we discover these other surprises during Advent:

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people's kind efforts to help us, the discovery of options in a situation that seemed dead-ended, a sympathetic friend in a wildly dysfunctional office, a window of time in a packed schedule, a flash of beauty, a check in the mail, or a stimulating conversation in an otherwise empty day.⁵

Another author reflected on how Advent has become ordinary and predictable: get-togethers with friends, performance of *Messiah*, time off from work, people in better moods—no surprises anymore. And then he wrote:

Maybe I needed to become open to surprise before I could wake up to the meaning of Advent, because when I think about it now, every aspect of Christ's birth seems surprising to me. Surprising that God would choose to reconcile with us by becoming one of us. Surprising, the humble

setting for such a momentous birth. Surprising also, the people to whom the event was announced and the ways it was proclaimed. Most surprising of all, the form that the hand of redemption would take—not a powerful fist demanding our crushing obedience, but a tiny hand that would grow to reach out to us in a relentless gesture of compassion. God with us.⁶

As we begin Advent once again this year, maybe we can also hope for something unexpected—for God's entrance into the world to catch us by surprise, for the gift of hope to fill our lives when we find ourselves standing in the fiery furnace.

¹ Carolyn Thompson, "Clue, Whiffle Ball, paper airplane enter Toy Hall of Fame," *The Elkhart Truth*, 11/12/17, C4.

² Daniel 3:16-18, *The Message Bible*.

³ Summer Meza, "Religion That Worships Artificial Intelligence Wants Machines to Be in Charge of the Planet," 11/17/17, www.newsweek.com/google-executive-forms-religion-artificial-intelligence-714416.

⁴ Hodgin, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 1452-1460). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #138.

⁵ www.franciscanmedia.org/advent-a-season-of-surprises/

⁶ Tom Wharton, Dec. 6, 2012, <https://stlukeinthefieldsblog.org/2012/12/06/advent-i-reflection-unexpected-surprising-love/>