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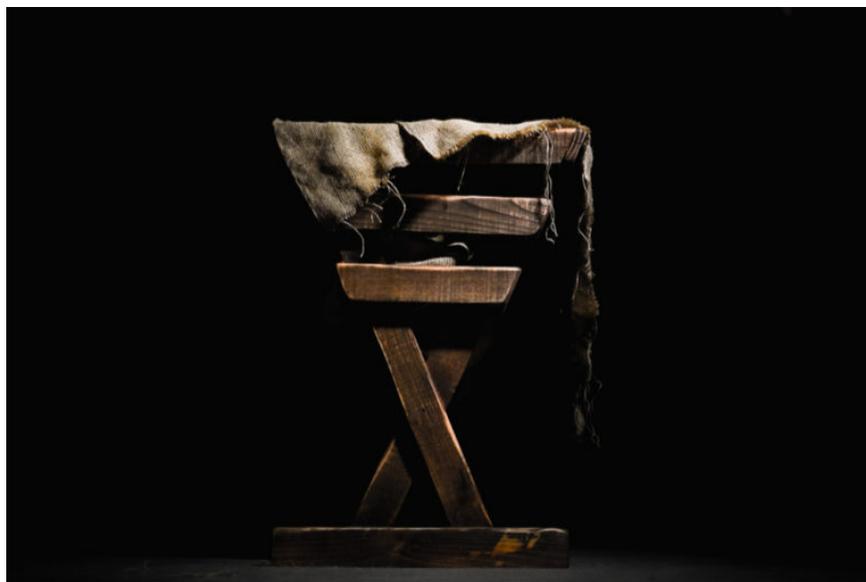
BEARINGS ONLINE

## Putting Lent Back into Christmas

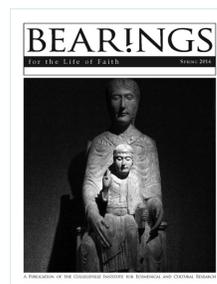
DECEMBER 6, 2018 BY GERALD W. SCHLABACH 1 COMMENT

This December, we are publishing a [series of essays](#) that reflect on the Advent season and grapple with its apocalyptic lectionary scriptures.

*Bearings Online* is a web-based publication produced several times a week that examines relationships between religion and culture, highlights unexplored facets of contemporary religious life, and suggests faithful responses to today's problems and opportunities.



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The commercialization of Christmas is old news. The war against Christmas is fake news. The wringing of hands is wrung out. Yet still the Christmas Muzak drones on: Santa's reindeer has run over grandma again this year. The real tragedy, though, is that according to the premature Christmas carols we cannot avoid, Jesus got born on Black Friday, the big sale day that follows American Thanksgiving Day. Or was it the day after Halloween, as stores were putting their candy, costumes, and decorations on deep discount? Anyway, what's a Christian to do?

Here's a modest proposal to rescue the Christmas season from sentimentality on commercially peddled steroids: Let's put the "Lent" back into Christmas.

We can start with disciplines that help us take Advent seriously. Churches that follow the liturgical year have a jump on others because their lectionary readings are prescribed. In turn, well-trained liturgical ministers and worship leaders will resist the nice feels that beloved Christmas carols bring, and instead insist on Advent music until the Christ child actually, liturgically, arrives. Cultures that make the Epiphany their major festival rather than December 25th will have plenty of time to sing their favorite

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carols during the actual Christmas season, though many Americans have only heard about those 12 days after Christmas from some goofy partridge in a pear tree. (Hint, hint: there's another idea.)

Away from church, it admittedly gets harder. When the snow starts to fall in northern climes and my fall semester starts to wane, I too can be a sucker for good holiday music. Listening to the [Minnesota Public Radio holiday stream](#) may keep me from getting run over by Santa's reindeer, but I still can't keep the Christ child from a premature birth. With the help of a few other iTunes music users who have "shared" their favorite Advent music, I have compiled a [playlist of my own](#).

The point is not to be legalistic (except maybe in our shared public worship, where I'll take a follow-the-letter liturgical minister any day in December). The point is to be mindful. The point is to be expectant. The point is that in a world gone mad with indifference to the suffering of Central Americans on an exodus of biblical proportions, with paralysis in the face of climate change, with numbingly horrific wars in Syria and Congo, with ... on and on, we need to expect more than the comforting smell of turkey or ham or chestnuts roasting on an open fire. We need an unsentimental, tough-minded hope.

So let's ask ourselves: What are we waiting for, in Advent? The church year lets us look ahead and see what we're really in for when we welcome the Christ child:

**December 25, the Nativity of our Lord.** A vulnerable family, with a pregnancy that has the town talking, barely counts in the grand scheme of an empire conducting a census. Since both parents can claim King David as an ancestor, they do count a little, but must go to Bethlehem under duress to enroll their names. They are at the margin, as all those quaintly familiar elements of the story really should remind us—the stable, the manger, the smelly animals, the welcome from those other marginal ones, the shepherds.

To receive that sweet little Christ child in the crèche we must immediately turn around and contemplate martyrdom.

**December 26 or 27, the Feast of Saint Stephen.** The date varies a bit between the Catholic and Orthodox church calendars. And while Protestants may not celebrate saints in the same way, the daily readings in their Common Lectionary also impose a bracing reminder: to receive that sweet little Christ child in the crèche we must immediately turn around and contemplate martyrdom. The child may be sweetness and light, but his future is bitter, the cross casts a shadow, and like Stephen, the church's first martyr, we too are called to carry the cross. Even if we are spared a grisly death like his, as one of the Church's first deacons, Stephen reminds us to start preparing through a *diakonia* of service to those who suffer

discrimination and neglect (Acts 6:1-6).

**December 27, the Feast of St. John the Apostle (Roman Catholic calendar).**

No, not even all of Jesus' original apostles died martyrs' deaths. John was one who seems to have died a natural one. Yet having yearned for power and prestige together with his brother James (Mark 10:35-40), John lived out the more ordinary martyrdom to which God will call most of us. He allowed his scale of values to be upended. Eventually he learned the lesson of Jesus' rebuke to the brothers' misguided ambition: Among Jesus' disciples, greatness would come not through tyranny and lording over, but from service to all (Mark 10:41-45).

**December 28 or 29, the Feast of the Holy Innocents.** Lest we miss the "Lent" that is part of Christmas, the church calendar now slaps us awake again by jumping ahead to one of the repercussions of the advent of the Christ child, even when he draws the honor of wise magi from the East. Though we will celebrate their visit on Epiphany, the last day of Christmas, we must foresee the wrath of Herod and other powers-that-be. The child is innocent but no less dangerous. Unable to snare him, Herod massacres other innocents

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I still can't keep the Christ child from a premature birth.

Warm family times around the glowing tree of Christmas morn are not sparing other

of Nazareth in his indiscriminate mass murder. No wonder we are already being called to identify with Stephen in his *diakonia* and martyrdom. Warm family times around the glowing tree of Christmas morn are not sparing other families from Lenten suffering.

families from  
Lenten suffering.

**December 28 through January 5.** Deep in the heart of the Christmas season, churches continue to commemorate martyrs, exiles, and refugees. The Roman Church remembers St. Thomas Becket, the archbishop slain in the Canterbury Cathedral for challenging King Henry II. The Orthodox commemorate no fewer than 20,000 martyrs of Nicomedia, killed by the emperor Maximian in 304. The Roman Church remembers Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzen on January 2 for defending Nicene orthodoxy at great personal cost; but since victory over Arian heresy was hardly assured in their lifetime, we might rightly think of them as vindicated dissenters. Meanwhile, as December 31 turns over to January 1, Catholics honor the Holy Family and Mary the God-bearer—bearing indeed the Christ-child not only in birth but in flight to Egypt as refugees in search of asylum.

**January 6, Epiphany.** The drama surrounding the visit of the magi has required spoiler alerts throughout the 12 days of Christmas. For perhaps they model how Christians with any measure of privilege might recognize the Lent that runs through the season. Whether or not the magi were “three kings,” they demonstrate how to bring our cultural resources, our learning, and our gifts as we respond to the coming of that vulnerable yet threatening child of hope. We too will have to look for the Messiah in out-of-the-way places.

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Make no mistake: there is joy in Christmas, but tinsel is not joy. Just as there is no resurrection without the cross, we find the true joy of Christmas only by going where Christ told us he would be from the day of his birth—among the lowly, the needy, the sick, the detained (Matt. 25:37-40). Like the martyrs and the magi, we too have to risk

irritating the Herods of our day, and identify with his victims rather than his court. The magi got to go home to joyous reunions with their families, but the route to “their own country” had to be “by another road” (Matt. 2:12).

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[@GeraldSchlabach](#) and in long form at [www.geraldschlabach.net](http://www.geraldschlabach.net).