

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 103



**The Wonder of
the Season:**
How Christians through
the ages have heralded
the birth of Jesus

Did You Know?



THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE OF 1914

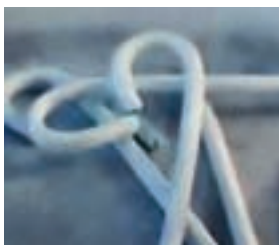
There are all kinds of stories about the Christmas truce of 1914 during the First World War—so many that some people believe it is only a bit of wishful thinking that keeps the legend alive. Yet letters and other eyewitness accounts bear out the fact that, for a moment, human goodness won the day.

Here's what we do know—starting on Christmas Eve, many German and British troops stationed along the western front sang Christmas carols to each other across the lines. On Christmas morning, some German soldiers emerged from their trenches and approached the Allies calling out “Merry Christmas” in their enemies’ native tongues. The men exchanged presents such as cigarettes and rations. There are even stories of a football game breaking out.

Along with their quiet celebration, soldiers from both sides used the cease-fire to gather the bodies of their brothers who had fallen in the no-man’s-land between enemy lines.

THE BIRTH OF ADORATION

St. Francis is credited with creating the first living Nativity in 1223.



THE SWEET STORY

Tradition holds that around 1670, the choirmaster at Cologne Cathedral was frustrated by fidgety kids at the living Nativity. He made some white sugar-candy

sticks—curved like shepherds’ staffs in honor of the shepherds at the stable—to keep the youngsters quiet.



THE POETRY OF CAROLS

Most of the “traditional” carols we sing today were not sung in church until the second half of the nineteenth century. In fact, many didn’t start out as songs at all. Isaac Watts wrote the words for “Joy to the World” in 1719, but it wasn’t set to music until Lowell Mason did so in 1839, possibly lifting pieces of the melody from Handel.

Charles Wesley wrote the words that would become “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” as a poem in 1739. In 1840, Felix Mendelssohn wrote a tune later adapted by William H. Cummings to fit Wesley’s words.



RING THOSE BELLS

One of the first signs of the season is the arrival of the Salvation Army kettles that greet shoppers in big cities and small towns alike. Salvation Army captain Joseph McFee began the tradition in December 1891, hoping to fund a free Christmas dinner for San Francisco’s poor. He secured permission to place a pot at the Oakland ferry landing. Its success encouraged other local Salvation Army corps to do the same, and, by 1895, 30 corps on the West Coast were using the kettles to raise funds. Today, corps around the world solicit donations using the familiar red kettles, raising about one-third of the money the Salvation Army uses to aid more than 4,500,000 people a year.

Editor's note

LOOK UP!

It's been my great pleasure to serve as guest editor for this issue of *Christian History*. While I don't consider myself a historian by any stretch of the imagination, I do fancy myself a bit of a connoisseur of Christmas, particularly the Advent season. I grew up a Missouri Synod Lutheran, which meant we followed the liturgical calendar, complete with Advent Sundays, a family Advent wreath, and a book of Advent readings that set the tone for our December family dinners.

For me, these weeks of anticipation, of pacing our joy, of wonderment and waiting, are just as potent as the dawning of Christmas morning itself.

That sense of the power of Advent is profoundly evident in a sermon preached by Dietrich Bonhoeffer on December 3, 1933, at a German Lutheran church in London. This sermon came on the heels of a November 19 mining explosion at the Grassmore Colliery in Derbyshire that killed 14 men.

Bonhoeffer helped his hearers see through the eyes of a miner in the last shaft of the destroyed mine, sealed in with rubble, waiting, dying, hoping against hope for rescue.

We all, Bonhoeffer insisted, are trapped in mines of our own making. Advent is the season in which we face that dreadful fact.

But that is not the end of the story.

Bonhoeffer continued, "Suddenly a noise that sounds like tapping and breaking in the rock can be heard. Unexpectedly, voices cry out, 'Where are you? Help is on the way ...!' A final, desperate hammer blow ... now the rescue is near, just one more step and he is free."

And then comes the release, the hope that is at the heart of Advent. "That is how it is with the coming of Christ: 'Look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'"

As we put this issue together, I found myself reminded of this beautiful message—"Your redemption is drawing near." That redemption comes through



loud and clear in this issue. It's in the story of a teenage girl who makes her way through a scandal to bring us a savior (p. 8). It's in the collection of minor feasts and holidays that celebrate the men and women who braved death in the name of God (p. 25). It's in the often-glossed-over details of the Christmas narrative that remind us that the characters at its center didn't know the end of this story, only that they were being asked to be part of something strange and frightening.

We know the ending. We know the rescuer arrives. But for these few weeks of waiting, we can be reminded that it is no small thing to be pulled from the darkness and into the light.

—Carla Barnhill, project editor

Carla Barnhill is a writer, editor, and teacher based in Minneapolis, MN.

A note from the managing editor, Chris Armstrong: We had some concerned feedback on Issue #102: "People of Faith" asking whether we are taking the magazine in a theologically liberal direction. In a word: No. Our goal with "People of Faith" was to hear voices, both historical and authorial, representing the diversity of American Christianity: Protestant and Catholic, conservative and liberal. But *Christian History* continues to work from the solid center of Christian orthodoxy—what C. S. Lewis called "mere Christianity."

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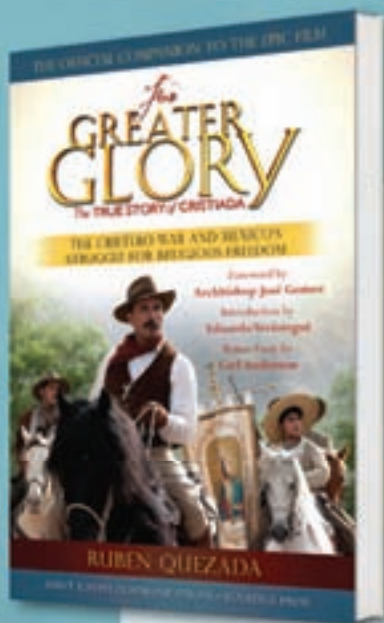
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The Cristero War and Mexico's Struggle for Religious Freedom

Ruben Quezada

Foreword by Archbishop José Gomez • Introduction by Eduardo Verástegui

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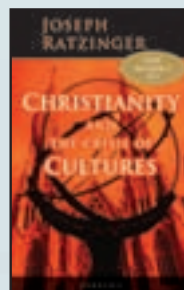
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CHRISTIAN HISTORY



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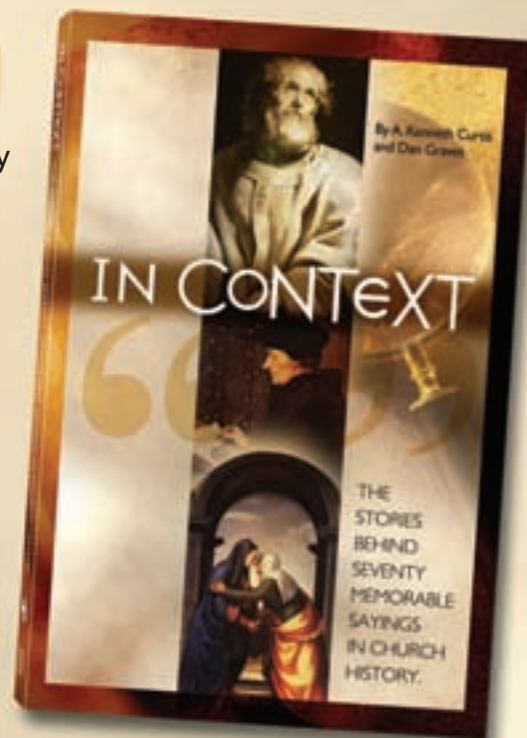
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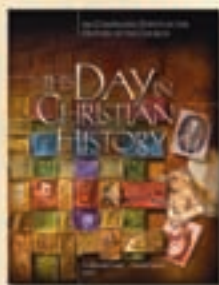
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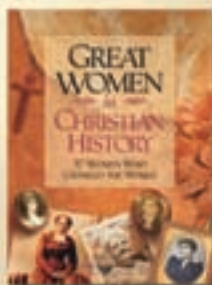


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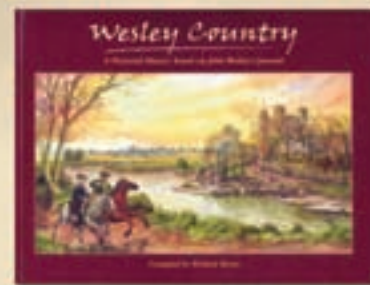


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Christmas countdown

WHEN DOES THE HOLIDAY SEASON REALLY START?

Elesha Coffman

IF RETAIL PROMOTIONS are any indication, Christmas begins as soon as the last bags of Halloween candy have been moved to the bargain bins. Our Christian ancestors, however, had other ideas.

The first church official to propose special activities for the pre-Christmas period was Perpetuus, bishop of Tours, in 490. To help his flock prepare for the holiday, he advocated fasting every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from Martinmas (November 11) to Christmas Eve. This practice, which mirrored Lent, spread slowly throughout France, Spain, and Germany. Then it crashed into Rome.

Roman attention to the Advent season trailed Perpetuus by about 100 years, and it took a radically different tone. While much of Western Europe, and at least portions of the Christian East, fasted, Roman Christians celebrated. Perhaps it seemed odd to them

to approach Christ's birth as somberly as they did his death. By the eleventh century, though, Rome had come around, and Advent meant no feasts, no recreational travel, no marital relations, and no weddings. (These prohibitions were dropped in recent centuries.)

MODERN ADVENT

Sometime during all of this, the start date for Western Advent slid back two weeks, to the Sunday closest to St. Andrew's Day (November 30). As a result, Advent can last anywhere from 22 to 28 days, though for the sake of year-to-year consistency, Advent calendars start with December 1. Yet not

THE MASKS OF BARBARA

Above: St. Barbara traveled in disguise to elude persecution. Celebrations of her day include costumes and masks like these held by students in Beirut.

Below: The men in this 16th-c. image symbolize the Incarnation. Just as they are safe in the fire, Mary conceived without being consumed by "the fire of the Godhead."





everyone kicks off the Christmas season at the same time or in the same way.

In the Orthodox Church, Advent still includes fasting, and in most places it lasts from November 15 to December 24. The Armenian Orthodox Church is an exception; its members fast for three of the seven weeks between November 15 (St. Philip's Day) and January 6 (Epiphany).

St. Barbara's Day, December 4, signals the beginning of the Christmas season in Syria, Lebanon, and parts of France and Germany. Some Middle Eastern customs for the day resemble an American Halloween—children dress up in frightening costumes and go door-to-door collecting candy and other small gifts. This activity has no relationship to the story of St. Barbara, in which her



A ONE-HORSE OPEN BOAT *Left:* St. Nicholas arrives in Amsterdam by sea. From here, he'll ride his white horse through town to greet the children and pay a special visit to the queen. *Above:* Dutch children leave their wooden shoes by the fireplace to collect presents left by Sinterklass. If they leave straw for his horse, they might get a sweet treat as well.

father locked her in a tower, killed her for her Christian faith, and was then struck by lightning. Not that it matters; historians now doubt that St. Barbara even existed.

JOLLY OLD ST. NICK

St. Nicholas's Day, December 6, inaugurates the Christmas festivities in Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, and parts of Germany. On the night of December 5, St. Nicholas—accompanied, oddly enough, by a little demon—brings gifts for good children, who set out shoes or stockings for him to fill. The Dutch make the biggest production of Nick's arrival, gathering to watch his ship land in Amsterdam, then seeing him off on his flying white horse. Obviously, a lot of this pageantry crossed over to America, except that our St. Nicholas arrives via the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and doesn't deliver his gifts until December 24.

Swedes wait until St. Lucy's Day, December 13, to commence Christmas observances. Lucy, who supposedly died in Italy in 304, became a Scandinavian favorite when that region converted to Christianity, beginning in about the eleventh century.

Strange or silly as some of these customs might seem, I'd rather have my calendar structured around the traditions of my faith than around corporate budget forecasts. I don't care how much retailers worry about fourth-quarter earnings. If they play Christmas music before Thanksgiving, they won't get my money. ☐

Elesha Coffman is an assistant professor of church history at Dubuque Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa.

St. Lucy's Day

HOW THE ITALIANS AND SCANDINAVIANS BROUGHT US THE SWEETEST HOLIDAY CELEBRATION OF THEM ALL

Carla Barnhill

'TIS THE SEASON of obscure saints and feasts. The Feast of St. Lucy, also known as St. Lucia Day, is celebrated on or around December 13. Unlike the less-well-known feast days that pepper the December calendar, St. Lucia Day has made its way to the church basements and fellowship halls of Lutheran and Covenant churches all over the United States.

A MARRIAGE OF MYTHOLOGY

The specifics of St. Lucy's story are a bit muddled, but most sources say she was a young Italian woman martyred around AD 310. Lucy was engaged to a man who turned her over to the Roman authorities when she refused to compromise her faith or her virginity before their wedding.

The Romans threatened to force her into prostitution unless she renounced her faith. She refused. But when the authorities tried to physically move her, they couldn't. Plan B was to stack wood at her feet and burn her, but the flames had no effect. Finally, a soldier ran a spear through Lucy's throat to make her stop her proclamations of faith, but this, too, failed to kill her. At last, Lucy was given last rites, and only then did she die.

In another, less-violent version of the Lucy story, she earned her place in the litany of saints by bringing food and aid to Christians hiding in the catacombs during the reign of Emperor Diocletian. To light her way and leave her hands free to carry as much food as possible, Lucy fashioned a candlelit wreath for her head.

Eventually, Lucy's story made its way from Italy to Scandinavia, most likely with missionaries who came to evangelize the Vikings. The story of a young girl bringing light in the midst of darkness no doubt held great meaning for people who, in the bleak North Sea December, were longing for the relief of warmth and light.

CANDLE HATS AND COFFEE

Today Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Italy, and a handful of Slavic countries still celebrate St. Lucia Day. With the exception of Denmark, most Scandinavian countries treat the holiday as a secular event, with local city governments and schools electing official "Lucias"




THE CROWN OF CANDLES: The centerpiece of the St. Lucia costume, the flaming wreath represents either the flames that could not consume Lucy or the flames that lit her way through the catacombs, depending on which version of the story is told.

who visit shopping malls, walk in parades, and hand out treats to children and senior citizens. In Italy, Lucy is said to ride on a donkey and bring gifts to good children during the night.

In the United States, the main event is the Lucia procession, usually held at a church on the Saturday or Sunday closest to December 13. Originally an in-home family ceremony, the processional now features an older girl—the chosen Lucia—dressed in her white gown, red sash, and crown of candles and leading a processional of girls of all ages who then serve coffee and St. Lucia buns (a sweet roll made with saffron) to the other women of the church. As the girls process, they sing a Lucia song that describes the light overcoming the darkness.

And the girl who gets to wear the gown and lead the processional? She is the church's version of the prom queen. Being chosen as St. Lucia is a cherished honor among girls at these churches, one they long for from their first processional when they hold a single candle.

Whether the story is one of true martyrdom or simple saintliness, the Feast of St. Lucy has found its way into Scandinavian-American culture as a mainstay of the Christmas season. 



Hail Mary

HER MOMENT OF OBEDIENCE TRIGGERED
TWO MILLENNIA OF REVERENCE

David Lyle Jeffrey

IN THE SIXTH MONTH of her elderly cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy, a young, betrothed Jewish girl was astonished by a visit from an angel. It was the angel Gabriel, and he greeted the girl Mary with a reverential "Hail" and announced that she had "found favor" with God and was to conceive and bear a child to be called Jesus. Shocking enough, but there was more: the conception would occur not by natural means, but by the agency of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35–37).

Mary responded in obedience. She called herself the Lord's "handmaiden" (Luke 1:38–48)—a humble title that set the tone for the rest of the New Testament accounts and became the foundation for centuries of Marian devotion.

Mary recognized that she had become, like Enoch (Gen. 5:22) and Noah (who "found grace in the eyes of the LORD" [Gen. 6:8]), one "highly favored" by God (Luke 1:28–30). She saw that she would forever after be recognized as one "blessed . . . among women" (Luke 1:28, 42). This blessing was not for her alone, as she sang in her Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), but for all God's children. She was the one woman, out of all women, through whom God would fulfill his covenant love and promise.

How improbable! This obscure Jewish girl became, through the work of the Holy Spirit and her willing obedience, the instrument of divine grace. Through her, the majesty and holiness of God joined the frail impermanence of fallen humanity. She was the chosen vessel



of the Incarnation, at the pivot point of God's saving plan. How could Mary not loom large in the imagination of the church?

THE WOMAN AND THE WORD

Although Mary the mother of Jesus is of almost unrivaled importance in historic Christianity, and although her role in salvation history is central, she plays a comparatively modest role in the Bible itself. Even where Mary does appear in the Gospels, she often has only a cameo, and in several instances, she does not even get a speaking part.

The gaps and silences in the biblical texts invite speculation, and writers of a number of apocryphal books (see sidebar) purport to reveal details of her biography not found in the canon, inspiring much art and even some doctrine.

The central importance of Mary in Christian tradition, however, is rooted in the Bible. It is in her role as the "mother of Jesus"—or, in Elizabeth's words, "mother of my Lord" (Luke 1:43)—that we meet her in the Gospels' pages.

Luke, of course, tells Mary's story most fully (1:26ff; cf. Matthew 1:18ff). There we find not only Gabriel's Annunciation to Mary, but also her poetic response, the prayer-song known as the Magnificat (because it begins "Magnificat anima mea Dominum," or "My soul magnifies the Lord").

The Magnificat reveals that, like Miriam and Hannah before her, Mary was a divinely inspired poet. This is a trait she shares with her ancestor David. Indeed, her spontaneous poem recalls the Psalms (especially Ps. 111:9), just as Elizabeth's words of greeting to her, "Blessed are you among women," echo Psalm 1:

MARY'S SANCTUARY: *Left:* The center panel of Rogier van der Weyden's famed 1440 *Annunciation* triptych includes a blooming lily in the foreground and a glass carafe on the shelf, which are intended to emphasize Mary's purity.

THE VISITATION: *Above left:* Ghirlandaio captures the moment when cousin Elizabeth confirms Mary's pregnancy. Their meeting brings them into the company of Sarah and Hannah, two other biblical mothers with strange stories to tell.

MARY AT THE TEMPLE: *Above right:* The Gospel of James tells of an event still celebrated in some Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. The story goes that when she was a child—perhaps as young as three—Mary's parents brought her to the temple to be consecrated to God. It's believed she stayed there until puberty, when she was given to Joseph as his ward.

"Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly."

The Magnificat soon entered the liturgy of the church. Anglicans continue to recite it daily at evensong. Catholics use it in worship, where it is often sung rather than spoken, as in the beautiful version by the Franciscan singer and liturgist John Michael Talbot. In this context all of the congregation joins Mary in praise: "Holy is his name."

Mary's Visitation to Elizabeth, whose baby, John the Baptist, "leaps for joy" in her womb at Mary's approach (Luke 1:39–56), completes the story of the Annunciation. Along with Gabriel's Ave Maria and Mary's Magnificat, the Visitation confirms that the events Mary is caught up in are indeed God's fulfillment of all that the prophets had spoken. Not surprisingly, along with the plethora of artwork dedicated to the Annunciation, Christian artists have created many images depicting this portentous visit.



Mary, the Sinless?

A number of venerable beliefs about Mary originated in a little-known book. Even those who know little about the veneration of Mary in church history have probably encountered a number of beliefs about her that can't be found in the Gospel accounts: the names of her parents, for example, or her supposed "immaculate conception" (birth without sin). Many of these come from a single source: the *Protevangelium* or the Gospel of James.

Although rejected as uncanonical in the sixth century, this book provided the material for many of the most important medieval legends, artistic representations, and theological beliefs about Mary. A Jewish-Christian work of the second century, it is an infancy narrative with extensive elaborations attesting to the sanctity and special powers of Mary.

A VERY OLD TESTAMENT BIRTH

The Gospel of James tells the story of how Mary's parents, Joachim and Anne, childless in their old age, were blessed by the birth of this special child. If the story has a familiar ring, it is because it closely parallels the biblical account of Isaac.

The *Protevangelium* also portrays Joseph as an old man, a widower with grown children, at the time of Mary's espousal to him. Recognizing her extraordinary purity and set-apartheness, Joseph becomes more of a caretaker than a husband to Mary.

A number of early church fathers, including John of Damascus and Sophronius, cited or commented on this account of Mary's conception, birth, and life, and it evolved during the Middle Ages into various other stories about Anne. Other apocryphal Gospels contributed material, including the "Mary

Gospel" of Pseudo Matthew. These narratives focus on Anne's childlessness through 20 years, at which point Joachim became a recluse out of shame. The couple's prayers were eventually answered: an angel appeared to each individually, promising a child who will become known to the whole world. Joachim and Anne were reunited at the Golden Gate (the subject of a painting by Dürer), and eventually the child, Mary, was born.

In the *Protevangelium*, the story resembles that in I Samuel 1 concerning the barren Hannah, whose prayer for fruitfulness is likewise answered ("Hannah" and "Anna" or "Anne" are variants of one name). Like Hannah's child, Mary is sent up to the temple to be raised as a virgin (a historical improbability), there to help weave a new veil of "true purple," the royal color.

PURE FROM THE FIRST

The *Protevangelium* also contributed to the belief in Mary's "immaculate conception": from the first moment of her conception, she was preserved from the stain of original sin. The *Protevangelium* draws a parallel between Mary's conception and that of John the Baptist, sanctified in Elizabeth's womb (Luke 1:15), seeming to suggest that the conjugal begetting of Mary was somehow devoid of sinful taint.

While some more elaborate justifications for a "sinless Mary" have been offered, especially in the later Middle Ages, this is still essentially the position of the modern Catholic Church: "Sanctifying grace was given to her before [original] sin could have taken effect in her soul."

This view, though often challenged, has had notable champions. In refuting Pelagius, Augustine is among those who declare that while all those justified by grace have known sin, he cannot, "for the honor of the Lord," even question whether Mary might have sinned (*Nature and Grace*, 100.36).

The term "immaculate conception," relating strictly to Mary's own conception, appeared in the formal liturgy first in 1854 (Pius IX), though the feast was adopted for the entire Roman Church in 1476 by Sixtus IV.

—David Lyle Jeffrey



THE BIBLE STUDENT

Because of the doctrine of the Incarnation, Mary is associated with the fulfillment of the Word of God and thus with Scripture. In many Renaissance paintings, the angel Gabriel finds Mary reading the Bible. It is historically unlikely that Mary would have had access to a scroll of Torah. Yet artists seeking to symbolize her faithfulness pictured her as a careful student of the Word of God. This attentiveness to God's written Word was not only a sign of her obedience, pious artists thought, but also a preparation for her coming role as the receptacle for the Word made flesh in Jesus.

Moreover, Mary's supposed study of Scripture would make her a model for all those who would seek to harbor Christ in themselves. So, in Rogier van der Weyden's (ca. 1400–1464) *The Annunciation*, Mary's bedroom is imagined as a church sanctuary, and her hand is shown raised over the Bible. This makes visual her verbal words of faith and obedience: "Be it unto me according to thy Word" (Luke 1:38). Following this line of thought, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), among others, speaks of Mary as the model and patron saint of all those called to study Scripture.

No painting of the Annunciation captures this theme so well, perhaps, as the *Annunciation* triptych of Robert Campin (1375/80–1444), sometimes called "The Master of Flemaille." Here, we see Mary seated on the floor rather than on the bench, absorbed in reading Scripture. Another book, perhaps a commentary, lies on the table beside a kind of book bag and some notes. Behind her hangs the *talit*, or prayer shawl—presumably belonging to her father. The vase on the table

A LIFE IN PICTURES: Perhaps no other life has been as well documented in art history as that of Mary. From the Byzantine depictions of Jesus' lineage (*below*), to the heavily symbolic renderings of the Annunciation such as this one by Campin (*above*), to DaVinci's portrayal of Mary with both her mother and her child (*left*), no detail—either real or imagined—has gone unnoted.

holds a lily; on it are visible Hebrew letters; the vase symbolizes Mary's virgin womb. The angel Gabriel has just entered the room; the beating of his wings has snuffed out the candle, and Mary is captured, by the painter's genius, just as she is beginning to shift her eyes toward Gabriel. Intent upon the Law, she is about to be surprised by Grace. A cloth protects the binding of the Scripture cradled in her arms, an allusion to the swaddling cloths in which she will wrap the newborn Jesus: this touch renders powerfully transparent the link between the Word and the Word made flesh.

SHE WHO WAS FORETOLD

Christians seeking links between Jesus' birth and Old Testament prophecies focused early and often on Mary's unprecedented virgin conception (cf. Luke 1:34). In this belief, they followed the New Testament sources.





THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN: *Left:* The various stories that surround Mary have led to her being seen as simultaneously common and divine royalty. Here, Botticelli portrays her as both, with the simple landscape behind her and the gilded crown of stars on her head. The latter is an allusion to one of the many names given to Mary in literature: *Stella Matutina*, or “Morning Star.”

In second-century frescoes from Roman catacombs, we see Mary represented as the fulfillment of the virgin in Isaiah 7:14. Such representations amount to a statement about the two natures of Christ and the purity of his birth—a statement verbalized and made binding in the Apostles’ Creed, the Chalcedonian Council, the Old Roman Baptismal Creed (Hippolytus), and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of AD 381.

THE TROUBLE WITH MARY

By the fourth century, apocryphal Mary narratives had become popular among sects such as the Collyridians, whom Epiphanius (310–403) denounced for offering sacrifices of cakes to Mary, saying: “Let Mary be held in honor. Let the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be adored, but let no one adore Mary.” Ambrose (ca. 339–397) similarly cautioned that worshipers must not divert to Mary the adoration due only to God: “Mary was the temple of God, not the God of the temple. And therefore he alone is to be worshiped who is working in his temple.”

Later controversy concerning Mary’s role led to various attempts by the church fathers to clarify her specific virtues. Virginity was already a high ascetic ideal for Jerome (340–420), Ambrose, and Augustine (354–430), each of whom readily celebrated Mary as the premiere example of virginity as a spiritual vocation. Jerome wrote his influential *De perpetua virginitate Beatae Mariae adversus Helvidium* (AD 383) as a reply to Helvidius, who maintained that mention in the Gospels of the “sisters” and “brethren” of Jesus, as well as the statement that Joseph “knew her not until she had brought forth her firstborn son” (Matthew 1:25), suggest that the virginity associated with Jesus’ conception and birth evidently gave way to a normal marriage relationship between Mary and Joseph.

Matthew, in his telling of Jesus’ birth (1:22–23), brings the promise in Isaiah to bear on Jesus—“Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (7:14). The virginity of Mary became one of the crucial tokens for early believers that Jesus was the Christ long expected.

Christian readers of the first century would have expected Mary herself to be about 12 years of age—the age ascribed to her by two apocryphal Gospels and the common age of betrothal. Mary’s youthful virginity was nonetheless theologically important, as was her lineage as a scion of the root of Jesse, the house of David. These matters, along with the spare canonical narratives, gave rise to apocryphal accounts of her childhood and parentage.

References to Mary are in other respects slight in the first centuries of the church. From the time of Irenaeus (d. AD 200), Christian apologists combated Gnostic heretics by pointing out Mary’s significant place in salvation history. This allowed them to clarify the biblical case for Christ’s human as well as divine nature, over and against the Gnostics’ spiritualizing of Christ. The formula offered by Irenaeus, that Mary is a “second Eve,” becomes standard in Marian literary typology.

Concerned that such a view might rank virginity less virtuous than matrimony, for Jerome an impossible reversion to the patriarchal system of the ancient Hebrews, he uses the Pseudo-Gospel of Mary and the *Protevangelium* of James (see sidebar) to argue three positions that subsequently became central to Marian literature:

1. that Joseph was only apparently, not actually, the husband of Mary—in particular, that he was elderly and remained a virgin;
2. that the “brethren” of the Lord were actually his cousins, children of another Mary, the wife of Cleophas; and
3. that virginity is spiritually preferable to wedlock, the latter entailing many hindrances to prayer.

THE PERPETUAL VIRGIN

Since very early in the history of the church, Christians have dwelt devotionally on Mary’s virginity—often insisting that her virginity was never violated throughout her life. Like other Marian themes, this one had its heyday in the medieval period. Anthony of Padua (1195–1231), who saw Mary as the natural human channel for devotion to the Passion of Christ, championed and codified the idea of the “virgin bride”—a common theme in medieval iconography. Anthony found “types” of Mary’s perpetual virginity in many places in Scripture: the burning bush of Moses that burned without being consumed (Exodus 3:2); the fleece of Gideon that, as a sign of God’s election, remained untouched by the evening dew (Judges 6:37–38); and the “closed gate” of Ezekiel 44:2, which, after being entered by “the LORD God of Israel,” was never again to be used.


Anthony also found Mary’s virginity prefigured in the mountain from which is hewn without hands the little stone that destroys the empires of this world (Daniel 2:34) and the “rod out of the root of Jesse” (Isaiah 11:1) which, like Aaron’s, miraculously blooms.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) wrote, in his commentary on the Song of Songs and in a Marian hymn, of the *rosa sine spina*—the “rose without thorns.” After Bernard, this became as frequent a symbol for Mary’s loveliness (see *The Virgin in the Rose Garden* image above) as the lily was for her purity (as the medieval carol goes, “A roose hath borne a lilly white”). Finally, in the “Unam sanctam,” one of the most important papal announcements of the Middle Ages, Pope Boniface VIII (1302) made the bride of Song of Songs 6:8 stand officially for Mary as representative of the church, thus coloring and amplifying much of the other typology.



HOURS OF THE VIRGIN: Above: Mary’s legacy continues in many of the ancient rituals of the church. Books of hours include a section called the “Hours of the Virgin,” eight devotionals to be read at eight specific hours of the day. These readings trace the general chronology of Mary’s life: the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the angels appearing to the shepherds, the adoration of the magi, the presentation at the temple, the flight into Egypt, and the Coronation of the Virgin.

Especially after the later Middle Ages, Christians saw Mary as a representative of the church in heaven—the “church triumphant”—to whom prayer might be addressed. Even so strict a biblicist as the “Morning Star of the Reformation,” John Wyclif (1324–1384), thought it “impossible that we should obtain the reward of heaven without the help of Mary. There is no sex or age,” he wrote, “no rank or position of anyone in the human race which has no need to call upon the help of the Holy Virgin.”

Perhaps if England had been influenced more by Wyclif and Luther than by Calvin and Cromwell, even Reformation poets might have shied away less sharply from Mary as a subject for poetry. Calvin’s central contention that Mary’s “virtues and all her excellences are nothing other than the generosity of God” (*New Testament Commentaries*, 1.22) leads him to say that “to this day we cannot enjoy the blessing brought to us in Christ without thinking at the same time of that which God gave as adornment and honor to Mary, in willing her to be the mother of his only-begotten Son.” 

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“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

THE STORY BEHIND THE SEASON'S MOST SOMBER HYMN

Jennifer Woodruff Tait

IT WAS DECEMBER 21 in Los Angeles in the early 1990s, and writer Kathleen Norris was hunting in the most unlikely place for nuns.

For over 12 centuries, monasteries and convents throughout Christendom have, during the final week of Advent, chanted a series of verses at vesper services before the Magnificat or Song of Mary from Luke 1:46–55 (“My soul magnifies the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior”). These verses, known as the “Great O Antiphons,” each name Christ by a different biblical title: Wisdom, Adonai, Root of Jesse, Key of David, Dayspring or Radiant Dawn, King of Nations (or of the Gentiles), Emmanuel.

Norris (a Presbyterian laywoman, poet, and Benedictine oblate) had spent much of the year in a writing residency at St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, and had hoped that she might be able to sing the O Antiphons with the community of monks there before returning to Hawaii to spend Christmas with her family.

A WILD ANTIPHON CHASE

Instead, her publisher insisted she make a stop in Los Angeles to publicize her bestseller *Dakota*. As she wrote in her memoir, *The Cloister Walk*, the publisher’s publicist was no help in finding a monastic community where she could sing vespers; his job was “arranging interviews and putting me in a tony hotel in Beverly Hills, thinking, as he cheerfully put it, that it would make a nice contrast with the monastery.”

Leads from a friend of a friend pointed her to Mount St. Mary’s College, high above the city. On her way, she stopped to do a scheduled radio interview and told the talk show host how she had “schemed for months to find the O Antiphons in the city. I doubt that it was the looniest interview the woman had all day, but it had its moments.”

A BELOVED HYMN *Left:* The hymn's angelic melody often appears in other works, including Ottorino Respighi's 1927 *Trittico Botticelliano*, the first movement of George Dyson's 1949 *Concerto da Chiesa*, and U2's 2009 release "White as Snow." Altarpiece by Fra Angelico, 1423–1424.

CALL AND RESPONSE *Right:* The word "antiphon" is the root of the musical term "antiphony," which refers to any call-and-response style of singing. From elaborate hymns performed by two interacting choirs to good old "Oh You Can't Get to Heaven" camp songs, antiphonal singing has a long history. Shown here is a 15th-c. Nativity antiphon.

The O Antiphons that Norris searched so hard to find are sung between December 17 and 23 by Roman Catholic and Anglican religious communities around the world. They are also the source of the Advent hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," one of the few hymns and carols for that season known to low-church Protestants. Sometime around 1100, an unknown author took these antiphons and turned them into a metrical Latin poem. Shortly after 1700, an unknown editor printed this metrical version in the collection *Psalterium Cantionum Catholicarum*.

THE BIRTH OF A HYMN

A little less than 150 years later, the poem came to the attention of Anglican priest and hymn writer John Mason Neale (1818–1866). Prevented from serving in a parish by lung disease, Neale divided his life between social ministry (he founded a nursing order of Anglican nuns and helped social welfare organizations care for orphans and young women) and the wardenship of Sackville College. In his "spare time," he set out to translate for his fellow Anglicans the great early and medieval Greek and Latin hymns for all the feasts and fasts of the Christian year.

Among Neale's many hymnal collections are titles such as *Hymns of the Eastern Church* and *Hymns, Chiefly Medieval, on the Joys and Glories of Paradise*. "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" appears in *Medieval Hymns and Sequences* (1851), headed by his notation: "This Advent hymn is little more than a versification of some of the Christmas antiphons commonly called the O's."

Neale's translation of the hymn made it into the Church of England's official hymnal in 1861 and spread throughout Protestantism. Along the way, various translators tinkered with the text; the version most commonly used today combines Neale's with alterations made for the Episcopal *Hymnal* 1940 and stanzas on Christ as Wisdom and Desire (King) of Nations translated by Presbyterian preacher and social activist Henry Sloane Coffin (1877–1954).

In Neale's day, hymnals for congregations were often published in sizes small enough to carry to church

in a pocket or bag. This meant the tunes were omitted from most hymnals; only occasionally did editions with tunes appear. In Neale's tune collection *The Hymnal, Noted* (1854), he copied the melody, using it only for the first stanza and refrain, from "French sources." Or so said the musician Thomas Helmore, who published the collection.

For many years, no one knew quite what Neale's "French sources" were, and though to this day no one knows how Neale came in contact with the melody, its origin was eventually traced to a fifteenth-century processional funeral hymn for French Franciscan nuns, found in a manuscript in the National Library of Paris. An odd origin, perhaps, but his matching of tune and text seems inspired today; it is difficult to imagine the words set to any other music—especially when the verses are sung in a contemplative unison and the "Rejoice!" bursts forth in sudden, amazing harmony.

GLORY AND JUSTICE

What is it about this text, whether as prose or poetry, that helped it to survive so long, in so many different traditions—and even inspired Kathleen Norris to search Los Angeles for someone to witness to its continuing presence? In a world, and sometimes even a church, that celebrates the days before Christmas as an endless obligation of organized exuberance, these words remind us that as Christians we are to long for another country, one where the coming Messiah wipes the tears of the sorrowing and casts down the mighty from their thrones.

When Norris found the community at Mount St. Mary's, the antiphon for that evening was "O Oriens," "The Dayspring:" "O Radiant Dawn, brightness of light eternal and sun of all justice; O come and illumine those who live in deep darkness and in the shadow of death." Or, as one hymnal translates that same stanza about the true source of our joy, "O Come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer/ our spirits by thy justice here;/ disperse the gloomy clouds of night,/ and death's dark shadows put to flight." It is that, in the darkness of Advent, for which we wait. And it is that, in the glory of the Incarnation, which will arise. **□**

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THE STORY IN PICTURES *Left:* Artists began to depict the Nativity in paintings and sculpture around 400. This Madonna and Child from the *Book of Kells* is dated around 800, making it the oldest surviving manuscript image of Mary and the Christ child.

KEEPING WATCH *Below:* The shepherds appear in Luke's Gospel, but not Matthew's, most likely because the two men were writing to different audiences. Matthew, writing to other Jews, emphasizes Jesus' role as King of the Jews—hence the appearance of the magi in his version. Luke, writing to Gentiles, stressed Jesus' connection to all people, even lowly shepherds.



That most familiar story

HOW CERTAIN DETAILS OF THE NATIVITY BECAME TRADITION

Sarah E. Dahl

ON A WARM, BRIGHT CHRISTMAS morning in early sixteenth-century Spain, Thomas of Villanova completed the Gospel reading and advanced to the pulpit. The Augustinian friar was preaching on the Nativity story found in Luke:

The simple hasten eagerly to see the newborn king lying in a manger . . . they adore and rejoice and mingle their artless praises with the heavenly hymns. . . . How the

Virgin rejoiced at the devotion of these simple folk! How delighted and gladdened she was by their praises! For by his own announcement God had begun to make known to human beings the mystery of divine condescension which had occurred in her womb for their salvation.

Throughout the Christian era, rich traditions have arisen surrounding the Nativity of Jesus, and these traditions give a prominent role to Mary. As the mother of Christ, the “Word made flesh,” Mary plays a special



part in God's plan of salvation. Although Christians differ on the nature of her role, Mary has been honored throughout history for being the handmaiden of the Incarnation.

A CAVE IN THE HILLS

Matthew and Luke give few details about Jesus' actual birth. According to their Gospel accounts, Mary was a young Jewish woman, possibly still a teenager, betrothed to a man named Joseph. Although the Gospels say nothing about his age, the church has traditionally viewed Joseph as much older than Mary, in part because of his apparent death before the start of Jesus' ministry.

Whatever their ages, we do know that the couple traveled to Bethlehem, Joseph's ancestral hometown, for a census. Upon their arrival, it became clear that Mary would soon give birth, and yet they could not find a place to stay. The "inn" of most English translations need not have been a hotel—it could refer to a relative's home, for instance.

Jesus likely was born not in a wooden barn but in a cave or a shelter built into a hillside. The hills around Bethlehem were dotted with small caves for feeding and boarding livestock. Joseph probably had to lead the donkey bearing Mary down a rocky, jagged path into the mouth of one of these caves as she was experiencing labor contractions. The Gospel writers do not mention if anyone else was present, but self-delivery was not uncommon in first-century Palestine.

The exact site of Jesus' birth is unknown, but by the third century, tradition had established a probable cavern. Constantine's mother, Helena, erected the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem over the small space. Nearby is the Milk Grotto, a small cave with chalky

AWAY IN A MANGER The traditional place of Jesus' birth has been a holy site since the first century. The first basilica was built here in 333 on the orders of Saint Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine I. That building burned in either 529 or 556. Emperor Justinian I built the basilica that stands there today. It has survived invasions, sieges, and earthquakes, and remains a holy place for both Christians and Muslims.

white rocks, where it is believed Mary nursed the baby Jesus as they fled from Herod's soldiers. The story goes that she spilled a few drops of milk that whitened the rocks. To this day, Christian and Muslim women visit the Milk Grotto and ask Mary to help them conceive and nurse.

MIGRANTS AND ASTROLOGERS

Two unlikely groups heralded the birth of the Messiah. Shepherds were often feared as a dangerous migrant group on the margins of society. The magi were probably Eastern astrologers who followed their pagan calculations to the birthplace of the Jewish Messiah. Mary welcomed these visitors and the praise they brought to her newborn baby; Luke tells us she "treasured" their words and "pondered them in her heart."

Early Christians were quick to identify the Nativity scene as a reversal of Isaiah 1:3. The prophet announced that "the ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." Origen and Augustine, among others, affirmed that in the guise of the shepherds and the wise men, humanity had literally returned to its master's crib.

MOTHER OF GOD?

Although the story of the Nativity makes clear that



VANITY PROJECTS *Left:* Artist Domenico Ghirlandaio included himself in his own painting, *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (1485). He is the man in front pointing to the Christ child.

LABOR PAINS *Below:* In this 14th-c. painting of St. Bridget's vision, Mary's "inexpressible radiance" is evidenced by her white gown and the shimmering aura around mother and child.

Word received from the angel the glad tidings that she would bear God." Two centuries later, Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria taught that the Word of God was "inexpressibly, inexplicably, incomprehensibly and eternally . . . born in time here below, of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God."

However, in the early fifth century, the influential Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius, began to challenge this way of speaking about

Mary. Around 428 he preached a famous sermon attacking the use of the term *Theotokos*, or God-bearer, to describe the mother of Jesus. It would be more fitting, Nestorius alleged, to call her *Christotokos*, the one who bore the man Jesus Christ. To refer to her as the bearer of God was to exalt her unduly. A human woman could not possibly birth the eternal Word: "No one can bring forth a son older than herself!"

Nestorius's position was rejected at the Council of Ephesus in 431, which decreed that Mary was in fact the one who gave birth to the second person of the Trinity. The bishops claimed it is fitting and proper to call her the *Theotokos*, not because she was the "origin" of God, but because the baby she delivered in Bethlehem possessed a human nature mysteriously joined to the eternal nature of God. To reject the term "Mother of God," they argued, is to deny the full divinity of Jesus.

Catholic and Orthodox believers continue to celebrate this understanding of the Nativity on the first of January with a feast honoring the *Theotokos*.

PAINLESS LABOR AND THE CHRISTMAS CRIB

Once Mary's status as Mother of God was firmly established within the church, devotion to her and contemplation of her earthly life increased among pious Christians. Mystical visions and art celebrating the Nativity spread, elaborating on the biblical story.

Bridget of Sweden (1303–1373) experienced mystical visions of the Nativity that she recorded in her *Revelations* and that fueled popular representations of



Mary is the physical mother of Jesus, the nature of her motherhood was hotly disputed in the Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. Was she in fact the mother of the second person of the Holy Trinity, or was she simply the mother of Christ's human nature?

As early as the second century, Bishop Irenaeus wrote, "The Virgin Mary . . . being obedient to his

LADY MADONNA *Right:* Images of the Madonna and Child are by far the most common religious icons in history. This image, the *Theotokos of Vladimir*, is one of the most venerated icons in the Orthodox Church.

COME LET US ADORE HIM *Below: The Legend of St. Francis*, a 14th-c. fresco, shows St. Francis taking part in a Christmas Mass—a precursor of today's living Nativities.



the Nativity from the fourteenth century through the Renaissance.

Bridget described Mary's labor as painless: since Mary had been cleansed of original sin in the Immaculate Conception, she did not suffer from Eve's curse. Rather, "In an instant, she brought forth her Son, from whom there emanated such an inexpressible radiance that the sun could not be compared with it." Renaissance paintings of the Nativity, which show Mary and her child shining in the center of the canvas, owe much of their visual appeal to Bridget's revelations.

St. Francis of Assisi had his own mystical experience of the Nativity when he celebrated Christmas Mass in a small cave in Greccio, Italy, using a crib for an altar. As he preached over a carved image of the baby Jesus, Francis experienced a vision of the Christ child in the flesh and was awed by the mystery of what Mary experienced at the moment of the Incarnation. Because of her obedience, the world received the presence of God encased in the helpless flesh of a baby. As the story spread, so did the tradition of placing cribs in Christian homes at Christmastime.

In Protestant churches after the Reformation, Mary played a less central role in celebrations of the Nativity, despite the fact that Luther and Calvin



maintained a high view of her place in salvation history. Emphasis was increasingly placed on the Christ child alone, rather than on his mother who birthed God into the world.

Nevertheless, all Christians appreciate the important role Mary played in the life of Jesus. Though he was fully God, Jesus was born from Mary and it was from Mary that he received his humanity. She experienced intimately, in her own body, the mystery of the Incarnation. In a dank cavern, recovering from labor amid the straw and squalor of the animals, the "highly favored" Mary became the first human creature to touch the face of God. **GH**

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Ed. note: for details of Mary's own birth narrative, see p. 10.



Advent: close encounters of a liturgical kind

'TIS THE SEASON WHEN EVEN THE FREE-RANGING REVIVALIST PULLS UP A CHAIR TO THE TABLE OF HISTORIC LITURGY

Chris Armstrong

I CONFESS: AS AN ADOLESCENT, when my parents tried to impress on my two brothers and me the importance and the intricacies of Advent observance, I could hardly keep from rolling my eyes. In a country that spends its cold Decembers in hot pursuit of food, presents, and parties, the historical niceties of an ancient liturgical season seemed, well . . . irrelevant.

These days, on the other side of an evangelical conversion and nearly a decade of graduate study in church history, I've begun to see what excited my parents about Advent. I'm even entertaining the possibility that my own young family might benefit from an informed observance of this

season of waiting. (How to help my kids keep their eyes reverently lowered and their hearts in tune during such observance is, I confess, still pretty much beyond me. But that's a discussion for another day. I'm sure my parents are chuckling as they read this!)

In fact, Advent season presents a unique opportunity to many Protestants. It's like the once-a-year conjunction of two planets: it brings a great mass of Bible-loving, praise-and-worshiping, extemporaneously praying, born-again Protestant Christians into close contact with a big chunk of the historic church's liturgy. Even many nonliturgical Protestants don't think twice about joining in the season's rituals, old as well as new. They count off Advent calendar windows, listen to lectionary sermon themes and Bible readings, and recite set prayers at the dinner table around candles in meaningful hues of purple and rose.

So, as Advent's four bright Sundays offer us ways to meditate on Christ's coming, let's explore the sustaining power of liturgical observance. John Bookser



THE ANCIENT FUTURE *Left:* Long the purview of mainline churches, Advent celebrations are increasingly common among evangelicals. Along with embracing ancient Advent traditions, evangelicals are adding their own spin on the season with efforts such as the Advent Conspiracy, a social justice initiative centered on encouraging Christians to spend less and give more. *Below left:* 13th-c. Madonna by Cimabue. *Right:* 15th-c. antiphony (hymnal) for Advent through Epiphany.

Felster, editor of www.americancatholic.com, observes churchly seasons like Advent “tie our lives to Christians throughout history.” In a time of year filled with indulgence, the observance of centuries-old Christian practices can feed us in a deeper and better way.

Once upon a time, in fourth- and fifth-century Gaul and Spain, “Advent” was a preparation not for Christmas but for Epiphany, the early-January celebration of such diverse events in Jesus’ life as his baptism, the miracle at Cana, and the visit of the magi (see p. 16 for more on Epiphany). In those days, Epiphany was set aside as an opportunity for new Christians to be baptized and welcomed into the church. So believers spent Advent’s 40 days examining their hearts and doing penance.

It was not until the sixth century that Christians in Rome began linking this season explicitly to the coming of Christ. But at that time, and for centuries after, the “coming” that was celebrated was not the birth of Jesus, but his Second Coming. It was not until the Middle Ages that the church began using the Advent season to prepare to celebrate Christ’s birth. And even then, this newer sense of the Lord’s “advent,” or coming, did not supplant the older sense—the Second Coming. The muted, Lentlike mood of penitential preparation remained alongside the joyous anticipation of Jesus’ birthday.

The modern liturgy divides Advent into a period, through December 16, during which the focus is Christ’s Second Coming, and a period, from December 17 to 24, focusing on his birth. It starts with sobering passages and prayers about the apocalyptic return of the Lord in judgment. Then it moves to Old Testament passages foretelling the birth of a messiah and New Testament passages trumpeting John the Baptist’s exhortations and the angels’ announcements.

Every year these rich scriptural reminders and the traditional prayers that accompany them set my blood rushing a little faster and bring a rising excitement: Christ came with plenty of prior notice! Prophets and angels joined to proclaim his coming! And now I can join too, with the cloud of witnesses stretching back to apostolic times, in the same proclamation!

And in the protected, quiet times of meditation, I can respond as I imagine believers have done every Advent since the tradition began:


I can bow my head and prepare my heart to receive the one who is always present, but who seems distant in the busyness of the season.

I can mourn for my hardness of heart.

I can hope in his grace.

And I can rejoice that in answer to the cry, “O come, O come, Emmanuel,” he came.

Would I really be able to do this—in the midst of December’s commercial rush of lights, decorations, present-buying, and piped-in carols—without a gently insistent, weekly liturgical pattern? Maybe.

But I’m not rolling my eyes anymore. 

Update: I wrote this piece several years ago, when my children were small. Now that we have a few more Christmas seasons behind us, I am even more firmly convinced of the benefits of using the liturgical calendar. —CA

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The real twelve days of Christmas

CELEBRATING CHRIST'S BIRTH WITH SAINTS OF THE FAITH

Edwin and Jennifer Woodruff Tait

AS IT NOW STANDS, the “Christmas season” begins sometime in November. The streets are hung with lights, the stores are decorated with red and green, and you can’t turn on the radio without hearing songs about the spirit of the season and the glories of Santa Claus. The excitement builds to a climax on the morning of December 25, and then it stops abruptly. Christmas is over, the New Year begins, and people go back to their normal lives.

The traditional Christian celebration of Christmas is a bit different, and exhortations to follow its calendar rather than the secular one have become routine at this time of year. The season of Advent begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, and for nearly a month Christians await the coming of Christ in a spirit of expectation—singing hymns of a longing that in many ways culminates on December 25. But if we look a bit deeper into Christian history, we discover that Christmas Day itself ushers in 12 *more* days of celebration, ending on January 6 with the Feast of the Epiphany. More than just lending their name to a cryptic holiday song, the “real” 12 days of Christmas give us a way of reflecting on what the Incarnation means in our lives.

Christmas commemorates the most momentous event in human history—the entry of God into the world in the form of a baby. The Logos through whom the worlds were made took up his dwelling among us in a tabernacle of flesh. One of the Christmas Day prayers in the Catholic liturgy encapsulates what



KINGS AND THE KING Above: The Feast of the Holy Innocents, a remembrance of Herod’s order to kill all male children after the birth of Jesus, serves as a reminder that the Christmas story is not without its moments of sorrow and tragedy. Left: King Wenceslas popularized the idea of the *rex justus*, or “righteous king.”

Christmas means for all believers: “O God, who marvelously created and yet more marvelously restored the dignity of human nature, grant that we may share the divinity of him who humbled himself to share our humanity.” In Christ, our human nature was united to God, and when Christ enters our hearts, he brings us into that union.

THREE FEASTS

The three traditional feasts (dating back to the late fifth century) that follow Christmas Day reflect different ways in which the mystery of the Incarnation works itself out in the body of Christ. December 26 is the Feast of St. Stephen—a traditional day for giving leftovers to the poor (as described in the carol “Good King Wenceslas”). As one of the first deacons, Stephen was the forerunner of all those who show the love of Christ through their generosity to the needy. But more than this, he was the first martyr of the New Covenant, witnessing to Christ by the ultimate gift of his own life.



FOOLS DAY *Left:* What began as a celebration of subdeacons eventually became a day of excess and debauchery with echoes of various pagan rituals. By 1431, the Catholic Church officially forbade the Feast of Fools.

THE NEXT SEASON

Below: The Protestant liturgical year includes a long season of Epiphany, which begins with the arrival of the magi on January 6 and ends on Ash Wednesday.

Commemorated on December 27, St. John the Evangelist is traditionally thought to be the only one of the 12 disciples who did not die a martyr. Rather, John witnessed to the Incarnation through his words, turning Greek philosophy on its head with his affirmation, “The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14, KJV).

On December 28, we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Innocents, the children murdered by Herod after the birth of Jesus (Matt. 2:16). These were not martyrs like Stephen, who died heroically in a vision of the glorified Christ. They were not inspired like John to speak the Word of life and understand the mysteries of God. They died unjustly before they had a chance to know or to will—but they died for Christ nonetheless. In

them we see the long agony of those who suffer and die through human injustice, never knowing that they have been redeemed. If Christ did not come for them too, then surely Christ came in vain. In celebrating the Holy Innocents, we remember the victims of abortion, of war, of abuse. We renew our faith that the coming of Christ brings hope to the most hopeless. And, in the most radical way possible, we confess that, like the murdered children, we are saved by the sheer mercy of Christ, not by our own doing or knowing.

AN UPSIDE-DOWN CELEBRATION

In the Middle Ages, these three feasts were each dedicated to a different part of the clergy. Stephen, fittingly, was the patron of deacons. The Feast of John the Evangelist was dedicated to the priests, and the Feast of the Holy Innocents was dedicated to young men training for the clergy and serving the altar. The subdeacons (one of the “minor orders” that developed in the early church) objected that they had no feast of their own. So it became their custom to celebrate the “Feast of Fools” around January 1, often in conjunction with the feast of Christ’s circumcision on that day (which was also one of the earliest feasts of the Virgin Mary and is today celebrated as such by Roman Catholics).

The 12 days of Christmas saw similar celebrations of the topsy-turvy and the unruly. A “Lord of Misrule” was often elected at Christmas to lead the festivities until Epiphany. A schoolboy was traditionally chosen as bishop on December 6 (the Feast of St. Nicholas) and filled all the functions of bishop until Holy Innocents’ Day. The Christmas season also sometimes saw the “Feast of the Ass,” commemorating the donkey traditionally present at the manger. On this day, people were supposed to bray like a donkey at the points in the Mass where one would normally say “Amen.”



FEAST OF FOOLS: COURTESY OF LAURENCE SMITH
THREE KINGS: VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON

EPIPHANIES AROUND THE WORLD Churches that follow the Julian church calendar celebrate Epiphany on January 19. The day commemorates Jesus' baptism rather than the visitation of the magi. *Below left:* The Ethiopian feast of Timket (Epiphany) is marked by mass baptisms. *Below right:* Russian Orthodox Christians celebrate by drawing sanctified water out of a cross-shaped "font" cut in the ice.



It is easy to dismiss all these customs as pagan holdovers (which many of them are), or at best as irrelevant and harmless follies. Indeed, the medieval church frowned on most of these practices, and the Reformers of the sixteenth century finished the job of suppressing them. But perhaps there's a message here worth pondering—that in the words of the horrified pagans of Thessalonica, the message of Christ turns the whole world upside down. In the birth of Jesus, God has put down the mighty from their seats and exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. Nothing will ever be safe or normal again. In the words of Michael Card, we are called to "follow God's own fool." And yet, paradoxically, this greatest of revolutionaries was not a rebel. The one who revealed the surprising meaning of God's Law and turned the tables on human traditions nonetheless submitted to be circumcised according to the teaching of Moses.

Finally, on Epiphany (January 6), the celebration of Christmas comes to an end. "Twelfth Night" (as all lovers of Shakespeare know) is the ultimate celebration of Christmas madness: Shakespeare's play features one of his many "wise fools" who understand the real meaning of life better than those who think they are sane. Epiphany commemorates the beginning of the proclamation of the Gospel—Christ's manifestation to the nations, as shown in three different events: the visit of the magi, the baptism of Jesus, and the turning of water into wine.

In the Western tradition, the magi predominate, but in the Eastern churches, Jesus' baptism tends to be the

primary theme. In Bucharest, children leading lambs walk through the subway trains in commemoration of the Lamb of God to whom John pointed. Orthodox Christians traditionally have their homes blessed with holy water on or around this day. Nowhere is Epiphany celebrated more joyously than in Ethiopia. Pilgrims from all over the country converge on the ancient city of Aksum, where they bathe in a great reservoir whose waters have been blessed by a priest.

Epiphany is often a forgotten festival. As the true end point of the Christmas season, however, Epiphany sends us into the world to live out the Incarnation, to witness to the light of Christ in the darkness. Following Jesus, we have been baptized into his death and Resurrection. Whether we are called to martyrdom, or to prophetic witness, or simply to faithful living in the joys and sorrows of our daily lives, we live all of our days in the knowledge of our dignity, redeemed through Christ and united to God. We are part of the strange society of people whose world has been turned upside down, and we go out to witness to this topsy-turvy truth: "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us: and we beheld his glory . . . and of his fullness have we all received, and grace for grace" (John 1:14, 16). ☐

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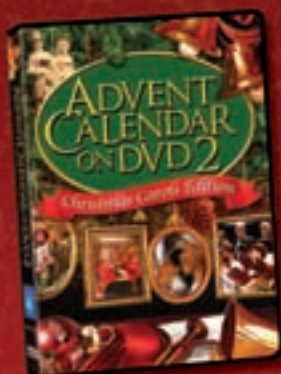
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