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David J. Mulder

Dordt College, david.mulder@dordt.edu

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The Problem with Christmas Carols for People Longing for the King

Abstract

"The commercialization of Christmas is the heart of the problem. Rather than taking time to be truly watching for the coming King, we get caught up in the stuff we do to celebrate."

Posting about missing Advent in the rush toward Christmas from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-problem-with-christmas-carols-for-people-longing-for-the-king/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

The Problem with Christmas Carols for People Longing for the King

 inallthings.org/the-problem-with-christmas-carols-for-people-longing-for-the-king/

Dave Mulder

December 12, 2017

in things

It happens every year. Even though I know it's coming, somehow I still find myself feeling disgusted on The Day the Music Changes. It gets me every time: I've been enjoying a day set aside for giving thanks, reflection, worship, a time around the table with family and friends, and—let's be honest—a tryptophan-induced nap on the couch. But something is lurking just behind Thanksgiving Day... and suddenly, at midnight, the music changes, just in time for "Black Friday." This pseudo-holiday in which we Americans celebrate materialistic commercialism is the launch of the Season of Christmas Chaos, and with it, the soundtrack changes.

Oh, yes... the Season of Christmas Chaos has a definite soundtrack. And I suspect you know them all: Christmas carols and holiday classics! "What Child is This?" and "We Three Kings," "Mary, Did You Know," and "Do You Hear What I Hear?"... It's a marvelous mixtape that stretches from the just-after-Thanksgiving kick-off right up until the culmination of it all on Christmas Day! Because every artist out there has a Christmas album, right? And so, with that huge catalog of carols ready and waiting, all of the songs that are somehow taboo up until the magical hour when Black Friday begins are now released with the full fury of festive frivolity, kicking off the Christmas Chaos.

"It's Christmas, everyone! Can't you hear it? Just turn up the radio—there's no doubt about it!"

All right, all right... I should confess, there are some Christmas-only songs I do love. I'm partial to "The Little Drummer Boy," actually. But when I've heard a couple dozen different versions of it by the first week of December? Even my favorites begin to wear a little thin.

Pour me an eggnog at the next Christmas party; I'll be over here sulking in the corner, Grinch that I am.

I think the problem with the instantaneous switch from “regular music” to “all Christmas, all the time” is that this isn’t really what the season is about. I hope you hear me right; it’s not that I’m a Scrooge. I used to say that I hate Christmas. There was a time about a decade ago that I got downright depressed each year at the beginning of Christmas Chaos Season. But more recently, I’ve realized that it isn’t really *Christmas* I hate. Mostly it’s the struggle going on inside of me that gets me feeling all frustrated and depressed. And *The Day the Music Changes* is just an obvious reminder, one that is omnipresent in the Season of Christmas Chaos.

You see, I have a conflict inside of me. I *love* celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, which is what Christmas is *really* all about, after all. The best songs in this season of the year are really about this celebration! But—truth be told—I also look forward to the gifts, the food, the *stuff*... that gets in the way of really celebrating the birth of the King.

And the carols playing incessantly are just one more symptom of this to me: the time of year that ought to be filled with real joy and peace and hope so often isn’t for me, because I feel so conflicted.

The commercialization of Christmas is the heart of the problem. Rather than taking time to be truly watching for the coming King, we get caught up in the stuff we do to celebrate. Advent is a time of waiting, of longing. However, jumping immediately to “Angels We Have Heard on High” the day after Thanksgiving doesn’t give us any opportunity to recognize the waiting-time that Advent is really all about.

Waiting comes hard for me. I am not by nature a very patient person. Maybe that’s why the Christmas season can be so difficult for me. I don’t want to wait for the celebration! Add to this that my desire to celebrate what Christmas is *really* about collides head-on with what our culture celebrates this time of year—all the *stuff* of Christmas Chaos. The collision of these two warring worldviews within me causes me to feel a little depressed and cynical and frustrated. I’m trying to keep looking for the coming King... and I keep getting distracted by the stuff.

I think we need to reclaim Advent. In the face of a culture that is all in on Christmas Chaos, this reclamation would be countercultural. But what if we were intentionally Advent people? What if we made this season a time of longing and seeking, not rushing around and going crazy with all the stuff to do? A time of quietly contemplating “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” rather than cranking up the latest rendition of “Joy to the World”?

This is where the story of Simeon in Luke 2 gives me hope. Here is an elderly gentleman who has been longing, and seeking, and waiting, for his whole life. God had promised him that he would see the King, and Simeon waited. Simeon seems patient, but I wonder if he had moments of impatience or doubt over the years. The King was promised; Simeon just

had to wait for Him to arrive. And when his time of waiting was over, when the King finally arrived—what joy he felt!

Like Simeon, I'm waiting too. Impatiently, and imperfectly, waiting for the King's arrival.

I'm turning off the radio, listening to fewer Christmas carols, and instead looking for Advent carols. If this rings true for you, may I be so bold as to make a suggestion? Check out Sufjan Steven's 2006 compilation, *Songs for Christmas*. (I know, I know... it sounds like a continuation of the problem, right? There *are* Christmas carols here, but they are not the traditional tinsel-sprinkled take you might hear on the radio. They are more contemplative, speaking to more... Advent-longing, perhaps?) If you want to give it a whirl, you can listen to it [on Spotify](#). Or, maybe just start with Stevens' take on "[Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing](#)," which I had never considered an Advent song until I heard this version.

I hope it's a blessed season of Advent longing for you. By the time Christmas day arrives, I hope you too are saying, "The King is coming again. I can't wait!"