

Extravagant gift: Vulnerable love

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [December 11, 2007](#) issue

One of the books I pull from the shelf each Advent is *A Sprig of Holly*, a collection of Advent and Christmas columns written for the Christian Century a generation ago by Halford Luccock, who was both a great preacher and a great teacher of preaching. For the December 5, 1951, issue, Luccock wrote about the song “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” which was then becoming part of the holiday repertoire, although it is actually centuries old. (The song has been played and sung so much since that it was named in a recent newspaper poll on the most irritating Christmas songs, behind “Do You Hear What I Hear?” and “Little Drummer Boy.”)

Luccock observes that “The Twelve Days” is about a list of “riotously inappropriate and ludicrous gifts.” A partridge in a pear tree? “What on earth could one do with that?” And that is precisely the beauty of it, Luccock observed. The old song contains the “high wisdom of completely inappropriate and useless gifts.” His advice to the reader was to give one’s true love an impractical gift. “Give grandma perfume, or dancing slippers, not woolen mittens.” “The best gifts of love,” Luccock wrote, “are those that show a lovely lack of common sense.” New Testament scholar that he was, he was being faithful to the text. The original Christmas gift was certainly impractical—a baby, born in a cow stall. What people wanted was a king like David who would unify the nation, rally the troops, drive out the occupying Romans and reestablish the monarchy. That’s what a Messiah is supposed to do—make things right by defeating God’s enemies, establish a new order of things based on real power. And so, when the gift was given, nobody much noticed.

God’s gift of love was not what people expected or wanted at the time—or want now, for that matter, when the air is full of rhetoric about a clash of civilizations, a world conflict in the name of competing ideas about God, truth, goodness and justice. We’d prefer a God who confirms our own ideas and who puts our opponents—who we assume are God’s opponents also—in their place.

That original gift challenges us in profound ways. No wonder we don’t expect it or much want it. The uniquely Christian idea is that the essence of God is not what we expect or want—power—but vulnerable love. The uniquely Christian idea is that

there is absolute truth in the newborn lying in a manger—truth about God, truth about the nature of power, truth about you and me, truth that could transform the world.