

The signs on Michigan Avenue: A change of heart about the commercialization of Christmas

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [December 4, 2002](#) issue

The church I serve is located in the midst of one of the busiest retail merchandizing areas in the country. Our closest neighbors are Bloomingdale's, Marshall Field and Lord & Taylor. So I have the opportunity to observe firsthand how the stores and the city prepare for Christmas.

The first sign comes in late September or early October when city crews install the tiny lights on the trees along Michigan Avenue. Nobody much notices them, but I do. I like the reminder that Christmas is coming. The next sign is the appearance of Christmas decorations on store counters, and wreaths and stars in store windows. On October 30 I noticed the first full-sized, brightly decorated Christmas trees in the shop windows across the street.

It is religiously correct to lament the way Christmas has been taken captive by commercial culture, how the humble Bethlehem birth has been appropriated by avaricious economic forces desperate for a year-end retail bonanza. I've preached a fair number of sermons on the theme. But recently I've had a change of heart. I find that I don't resent those reminders of Christmas that appear in early autumn. I even feel a twinge of gratitude and anticipation when I see the first October Christmas tree.

I don't mind the culture's appropriation of the Christmas celebration as much as I used to. I attribute this change not to a softening of my theological sensitivities but to something like the opposite—a deepened gratitude for the claim that Christians make and celebrate at Christmas, namely that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us in this world; that the Holy came down and visited us in a very earthy place. After all, the birth of Jesus happened not in a religious sanctuary, cloistered from everyday realities, but in a crowded inn, amid weary travelers and the sounds

and smells of animals.

The incarnation is mysterious, huge and indescribable. And there's a sense in which the incarnation is honored by everything human it has inspired—even by what is excessive and silly on Michigan Avenue. The world needs what Christmas celebrates: God's amazing love and God's promise of peace on earth, good will among us.