

Setting off alarms

By [Thomas G. Long](#)

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*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Long's current *Living by the Word* column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

I know of a congregation that, for many years, provided a “living nativity pageant” in its community. The church is in the center of town and has an expansive front lawn. On a certain December Sunday afternoon each year, it would fill that lawn with live sheep and goats and donkeys, costumed shepherds and wise men, a gaggle of angels, an innkeeper, a manger, and, of course, the holy family. Ample crowds would gather each year to see the Christmas story acted out live and in person.

One year, the men who were playing the role of the Magi borrowed a thurible, an incense-burning censer, from the Catholic parish in town. The idea was that as they trekked across the lawn toward the manger, these mysterious Magi from the East would surround themselves with a fog of incense to add to the exotic quality of their appearing.

So the wise men gathered in the fellowship hall, waiting for their cue. Just before the moment arrived, they lit the incense and got it burning properly. Unbeknown to them, though, they managed to trigger the church’s fire alarm, which sent an automatic signal to the local fire department.

As they walked toward the manger, each bearing a gift for the newborn Jesus, they were astonished to see yellow-slickered firemen unrolling fire hoses across the church lawn and mingling in a scene of confusion with the shepherds, angels, and goats. Ultimately, the fire chief spotted the burning incense pot, put two and two together, and announced in a loud voice heard by all, “You %#@& wise men are setting off alarms all over town!”

Somewhere in the Great Beyond, the original Magi smiled in approval, remembering that they, too, had set off alarms all over town.