

Song in the city: Divine birth in a mundane world

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [December 13, 2005](#) issue

One of the most memorable sermons I ever heard—one of the very few I actually remember—was a Christmas Day sermon preached by Charles Leber. At the time he and Ulysses Blake were copastors of First Presbyterian Church on Chicago's South Side. Leber's sermon was titled "Another Roman Holiday." He explained that the early church chose December 25 to celebrate Jesus' birth even though everyone knew the birth had happened sometime in the spring. December 25 was the beginning of the Romans' year-end holiday, which Leber said was quite a bash: seven straight days of eating, drinking and reveling. The Christians did not participate in these revels. They decided to draw attention to themselves by rejecting the celebration. And so, to provide an alternative and to help them resist the sensual temptations of the Roman holiday, they came up with Christmas.

I don't know about the historical accuracy of that story, but it made a great sermon, and it provides a useful way to address the annual dilemma of how to celebrate the incarnation in a culture that's going a little crazy.

I remember Leber's sermon every year when merchants on Michigan Avenue hold a holiday parade on the Saturday night before Thanksgiving. The parade is not much as parades go: a few floats, a few inflated Disney characters, and Santa. The trees up and down the avenue are adorned with tiny Italian white lights, and at the designated moment, usually at Mickey Mouse's command, someone pulls a switch and the lights all come on.

Sometimes it feels like the church is on the front lines of a culture war, surrounded by Bloomingdale's, Lord and Taylor, Marshall Field's, all of which have been revving up for Christmas since Halloween. Across the street, at Paul Stuart, you can spend \$200 for a necktie and \$500 for a pullover sweater. I probably think about Leber's sermon at least once a day.

On the evening of the parade, wanting to be a good neighbor, our congregation hands out cups of hot cider and sings carols on the front steps of the church as the crowd gathers. Members of our choir anchor the group. This year we had competition from a group of young girls doing a rap routine to blaring music. We sang "Silent Night."

The nice thing is that lots of people who walk by join in the singing. We provide extra copies of the carols. One particularly boisterous trio, two men and a woman who obviously had been to one of the nearby watering holes, refused the song sheet and sang by heart all three verses of "O Come, All Ye Faithful." So I was reminded that the birth we prepare for happened in just this mundane, crass, banal, greedy world, which God loves so much.