

God even in Christmas

By [Julie Clawson](#)

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I'm a sucker for Christmas songs. I'm not so far gone that I'm okay with department stores playing some pop princess's version of "Baby It's Cold Outside" on an 85-degree early November day here in central Texas. But let me join in on a round of "O Holy Night" or "White Christmas" and I'll get choked up every time.

They might be overdone and cheesy, but there is something visceral about the collective emotion that Christmas songs tap into. Something is stirring even in all the schmaltz and sentimentality, something that goes beyond the consumeristic trappings. God shows up in the midst of all that cheese.

This week I finally allowed myself to click on the "Christmas Songs" playlist on my iPod (yes, I waited until Thanksgiving week). The songs shuffled between Willie Nelson and Enya and Harry Connick Jr. and The Wiggles. Then the player landed on U2's version of "I Believe in Father Christmas." Released two years ago to raise awareness for World AIDS Day, this quickly became my favorite Christmas song--mostly because of a one-word change Bono makes to the lyrics.

The original lyrics question any deeper meaning of Christmas and encourage people to simply enjoy the chance to be with family. The song writes off the reasons for the season as a mere bill of goods:

They sold me a dream of Christmas
They sold me a silent night
They told me a fairy story
Till I believed in the Israelite.
And I believed in Father Christmas
And I looked at the sky with excited eyes
Till I woke with a yawn in the first light of dawn

And I saw him and through his disguise

We were apparently sold to and told until we believed. But Bono changes the fourth line to "*But I believe* in the Israelite." This present-tense affirmation changes everything:

We still have the trappings of Christmas and the competing narratives. But God shows up--there is room for belief. Yes, our eyes are full of cheap tinsel; yes, we can see through Father Christmas's disguise. We may not get the snow at Christmas or peace on earth--but that isn't all there is. We can say, "But I believe in the Israelite," and this affirmation provides a meaning that the season otherwise lacks--and even infuses the season's trappings with meaning. The sparkly lights, the trees, the tinsel and the songs (even the cheesy ones) can connect us with a surprisingly weighty soul language.