

Advent in post-Ferguson America

By [Kate Bowler](#)

December 2, 2014

Thanksgiving is over in post-Ferguson America, and it can't come too soon. A national celebration of country, family, and freedom from want follows on the heels of protests, frenzied media, and the deployment of the National Guard over the failure of a grand jury to indict a police officer over the shooting of 18-year old Michael Brown. In an America deeply divided over race and debate over individual character vs. systems, bad apples vs. rigged games, the long dawn of Advent has begun. Thank God.

Post-Ferguson America needs Christmas, but not Christmas as usual. The holidays are synonymous not only with shopping deals and a flurry of presents, but with acts of charity. Soup kitchens overflow with eager families ladling broth and church altars are stacked with shoeboxes to be sent to the faraway children. The poor are clothed and the hungry are fed. But this Christmas, it's not enough.

People are hungry for the world turned upside-down, which is precisely what Christmas has been throughout Christian history. Advent is preparation for the great inversion: God coming to Earth in the form of a human baby; the ruler of the cosmos trapped in a squalling package of helpless flesh. He was born to save us—and he will—but first he must melt our hearts, appearing not as a sage or a philosopher or an emperor but as a cold little child with no home. He disarms us with his tender vulnerability and summons us to enter his world as little children too. There is no power to be found here as the world understands it.

For many Americans, this is where the story ends: a gentle knock on the door of the human heart. This tender moment of conscience is well suited to acts of charity, which allow people to keep their roles: giver and receiver, rich and poor, high and low, white and black, police and policed. Christmas beckons believers to see the kingdom of God through the disruption of the ordinary. “The last will be first” (Matthew 20:16). In the Middle Ages, this was recognized at Christmas by appointing a little boy to the office of bishop. “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35). And so the city of York would declare a Yule peace and fling open

the gates to the homeless and the wanderers. Days allotted to different groups at the margins of society—servants, old women, young girls, and children—allowed them to step forward and demand charity from their masters. The magic of this time of year was a moment of suspension (if temporary) of business as usual. And these moments pointed to the clues everywhere that powers—oppressive and pervasive powers—rule this world. And for 11 months we fail to see them as they really are.

Americans want to remember the peace of the manger, but they forget that the Christmas story does not end there. December 28 marks the Feast of the Holy Innocents commemorating Matthew's history of the political fallout after Christ's birth. King Herod's fear that Jesus will usurp his power leads him to murder all baby boys in Bethlehem in an attempt to end the threat. Waiting for Jesus in Advent becomes an act of witness. We see the violent contractions of empire follow him from his birth to his gruesome eventual death. A baby is born. Other babies die. Which is why the English "Coventry Carol" sings the nativity story with the voices of mothers singing lullabies for the babies they have lost.

This is a Christmas story capable of keeping faith with a post-Ferguson America, capable of hearing the sounds of black mothers crying over their sons. Jesus' birth is remembered in the shadow of empire and death. It promises great reversal. His birth portended both the power and the limits of the Roman Empire, as the kingdom he spoke of was present, but painfully limited. But this season we look for signs of its presence in the arrival of a baby crying. Thanksgiving is over. Thank God.

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