

Welcome intrusion

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [December 23, 2015](#) issue



Thinkstock

After the terrorist attacks in Paris and Mali, the downing of a Russian airliner, and a suicide bombing in Beirut, I went to church with a heart full of foreboding, dread, and concern for the future. Worship that morning included the dedication of a new pipe organ, and I was uncomfortable. Was it appropriate, in the midst of violent hatred, the killing of innocents, the nihilism and fear, to be celebrating a pipe organ?

The sermon was a dialogue between spoken word and organ music. The preacher creatively led us in a survey of our historic faith as reflected in scripture: exultant praise and gratitude to the Creator, weeping and lament at suffering, tragedy, and dislocation, comfort and thanksgiving for homecoming and redemption, and exultant joy at the presence of a loving God in the midst of life, even at its darkest moments. The organist responded to each of these themes with passionate music of lament and consolation or praise and adoration. Halfway through I concluded that this is exactly what Christian faith affirms: there is beauty in the midst of ugliness, truth in the midst of lies, love in the midst of hatred, and light shining in the midst of darkness.

It is this not always reasonable assertion and promise that has touched me deeply for as long as I can remember, particularly at Christmas.

We invest a lot of time, energy, and emotional resources in creating a perfect Christmas. We decorate our homes exquisitely, placing ornaments gracefully on the tree and a traditional, worn star at the very top. We prepare all the familiar foods with care and wrap each gift lovingly.

But the first Christmas was anything but pretty and perfect: a peasant couple, she heavily pregnant, traveled a long and arduous journey to an inn full of guests, ending up in a cow barn out back where she endured the pain of labor and birth. Animals shuffled restlessly at the intrusion. The man did what he could to help, and the baby was placed in the cow's feed box. Shepherds claimed to have seen and heard an angel chorus; mysterious Magi had seen a new star. Then, almost immediately, there was terror, the killing of innocent children, mothers weeping, and a family—now refugees—fleeing from violent danger.

It's both mystery and miracle: an unflinchingly human story that sounds as if it could be happening somewhere in the Middle East today. What our faith holds onto and celebrates in the midst of all the hyped-up hoopla of Christmas is that God came into human history 2,000 years ago and continues to come into history in that same mysterious, quietly human way today. As the early Christian church was struggling to put the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ into words and understandable theological constructs, St. Augustine wrote simply, "Man's maker was made man that he, ruler of the Milky Way, might nurse at his mother's breasts."

It is faithful and necessary to remember and celebrate the story every way we can—yes, including the dedication of a pipe organ—even when we're in the midst of violent hatred and innocent suffering, because that is the kind of world in which the story first happened.

A blessed Christmas to all of you.