

I kissed Advent purity goodbye

By [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#)

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I was raised in an ecumenical church community affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. When I later joined a Mennonite church, where many members were not raised with the church calendar, I became a bit of an Advent purist. Maybe a lot of one.

It's my favorite liturgical season, and I wanted to share that love with others. I [earnestly tried](#) to get more Mennonites on board with observing Advent.

I requested that my holiday-music-loving husband avoid playing Christmas music before Christmas Eve, instead making a special playlist with a few selections from Handel's *Messiah* and a couple of other safe songs that don't celebrate Christ's birth as having already happened. I declined to decorate our home until we returned from visiting family, which was usually a few days before Epiphany. (One year I left the decorations up until Lent, which didn't really make up for anything.)

Then last year something began to shift.

It began when I walked into the intensive care unit the week after Thanksgiving. I work part time as a hospital chaplain, and while I love serving alongside the ICU staff in caring for very ill patients and their families, I think we'd all admit that it can be a depressing place. When I surveyed the mix of nativity scenes, fake snow, and Santas around the nurses' station and break room, I thought, "Thank God. This really brightens the space."

Whether in an ICU or on crowded streets in shopping districts, Christmas decorations can bring some needed cheer. It doesn't make the pain go away, and for some it makes the pain more difficult. But for others it may make it more bearable. Glittery red wrapping paper and festive lights may actually impart hope and courage to face another day.

The shift in me continued as I came to see gift-giving (of stuff, to our loved ones) as a source of genuine joy. Standing in line at a big-box store to buy household items on a Friday, I noticed that a woman in front of me was buying toys. Plastic cars that were probably made under unsafe working conditions. I watched her pull out several crisp twenties; I imagined she had cashed her paycheck at the end of the week and was buying Christmas presents. And I pictured happy children opening those presents, how they'd roll the toy wheels all over the floor with delighted vroom vrooms.

CC blogger Jason Micheli [pointed out last year](#) that it isn't only the Santa-and-gifts-under-the-tree version of the holiday that's materialistic. "Christmas is when Christians celebrate that God took human (material) flesh and lived a life just like ours amid all the material stuff of everyday life," Micheli wrote. The magi brought Jesus gifts, "expensive stuff too."

We may not want more things to put on a shelf or in a cabinet. But [even gifts intended to be used up can be lavish](#).

The challenge is to hold the desire for merry and bright—and yes, gifts given and received—with the deeper longing for hope, peace, and joy that Advent invites us to nurture. The vision of [the world turning](#) is what can truly make our hearts sing. Maybe even a Christmas carol or two.