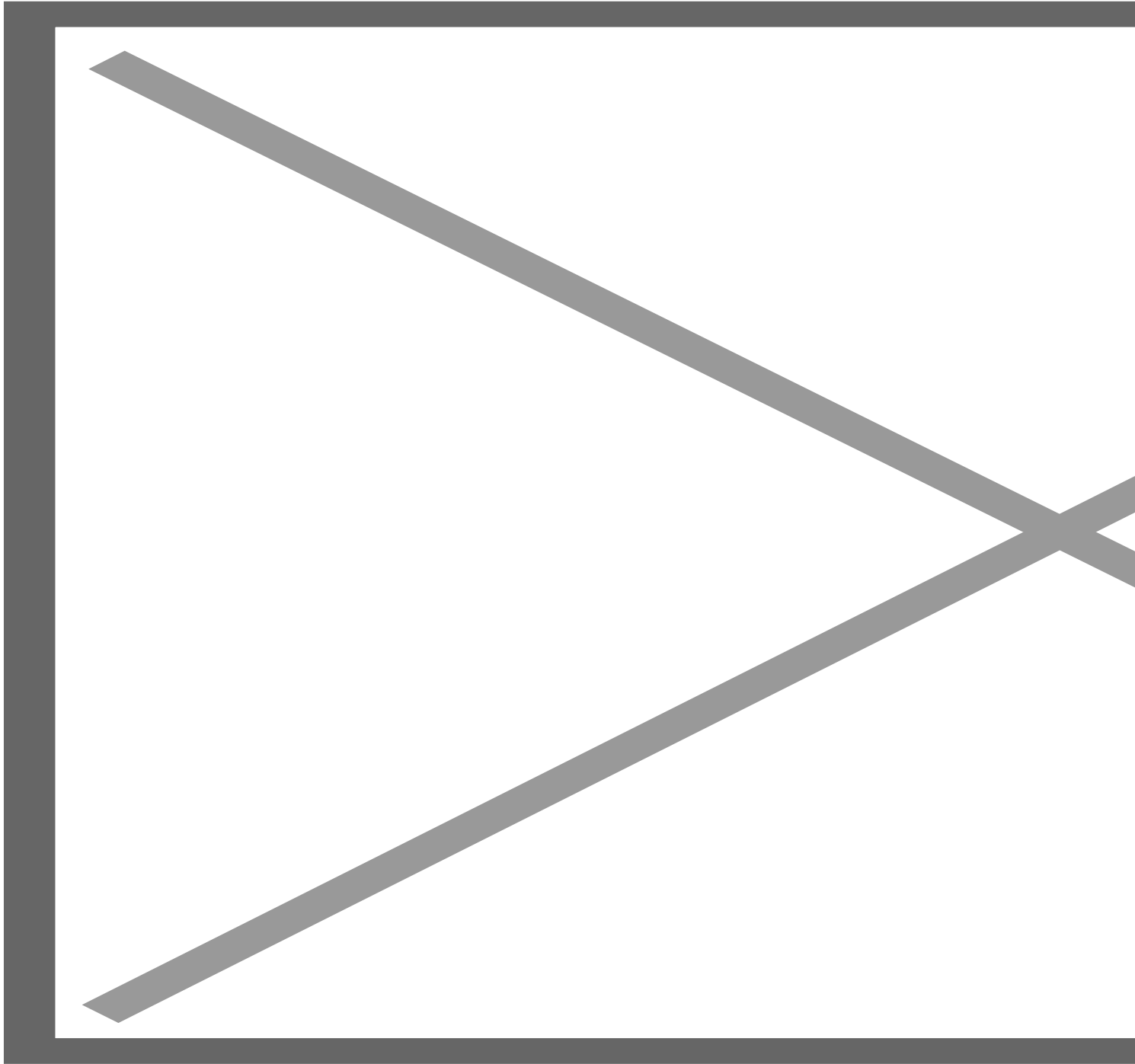


Advent in all its terror

If we remove the difficult facts of history leading up to Jesus' birth, the story loses its power.

by [Yolanda Pierce](#) in the [December 2025](#) issue

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Century illustration (Source images: Creative Commons)

There are images that are seared in your memory, which your mind can recall with even the slightest hint. The famous 1863 “scourged back” photograph is one such image for me. It features an enslaved person, known only as Peter, whose body is heavily marked by keloids and scars, the physical remnants of punishment, abuse, and torture. The photo was widely circulated by abolitionists throughout the end of the 19th century, and later it made its way into the textbooks of my own education.

Viewing this photograph elicits shame for some and discomfort for others, as it is a stark reminder of this country’s not-too-distant past. It is a visual encounter with real cruelty that we’d sooner forget than remember. It begs the question, How deep are the psychological and spiritual wounds this person endured? What are the depths of the pain we cannot see? The vivid scars tell an intimate and personal story of one man’s life under the cruelty of chattel slavery. They also bear witness to the brutality authorized and sanctioned by an entire nation.

When the Department of the Interior ordered this photo removed from a national monument in September, it grieved my spirit. It is as if by removing and erasing these tangible reminders of injustice, we can pretend that the continuing legacy of these wounds no longer exists. We want to pretend that if the scars cannot be seen, then the pain was not really inflicted. It is a deliberate case of historical amnesia: how we are willing to selectively forget those aspects of our history that we cannot, or will not, reconcile with our current culture. By refusing to deal with the troubling and bitter parts of history, we are left telling only the most sanitized versions, the versions that make us comfortable.

The deliberate, careful work of remembering the story behind the story—the hard history behind the headlines—is the responsibility of those who take their faith seriously. How do you understand a community’s survival without understanding its peril? How do you understand the passion without understanding the sacrifice? How can you journey through the story of a miracle without understanding the deep need which precipitates it?

Advent is the season of remembering, expecting, and waiting for the coming of Jesus into the world. But we cannot do so through the lens of historical or religious amnesia. Only when you begin to take into account the historical specificity of what leads to Advent are you truly able to understand the depth and breadth of this event. Only by remembering the history you might prefer to forget can you grapple with the wonder and beauty of the season.

During Advent, we must remember the Creator who radically sets aside the oligarchy—for it was the sounds, smells, and sights of a stable which greeted the newborn babe, not the splendor of a palace. No longer would princely wealth be the only marker of authority. Even a child born on the fringes of society could become God-With-Us.

During Advent, we must remember the Creator who radically suspends the patriarchy and allows an unwed young woman to be the bearer of the Anointed One, the *Theotokos*. No longer are women to be considered unworthy to bear the Word. It is a woman whose cries and labor pains deliver the first news of the Word made flesh, just as later it will be women who first bring the good news of the risen Savior.

During Advent, we must remember the Creator who radically breaks the bondage of racial and cultural hegemony, choosing a despised and peculiar people to receive the revelation of the great I Am. No longer will the hierarchy reign. The world is turned upside down, and those peoples and cultures considered weak and foolish are chosen to confound the mighty and the wise.

We need, perhaps now more than ever, to wrestle with the brutality of Advent: a child already condemned to death by political decree; a fearful young woman who did not volunteer for the task of bearing the Christ Child;

an infant born among domestic animals in the humblest of circumstances; a mother who endures childbirth, dangerous even under the best conditions, while traveling; a family that must wrestle with what will become of their vulnerable child. If we remove the hard facts of history leading up to Jesus' birth, the story loses its power and awe and wonder.

December features twinkling lights, beautiful music, and little children dressed as angels. It's a lovely gesture to mark the holiday season by exchanging gifts or doing acts of kindness. But the power of the story is connected to the complicated history, theology, and culture of an ancient community—along with the story of one small family, whose obedience to God and remembrance of their history, throughout generations of slavery and freedom, made it possible for us to keep sharing this Advent word.

Advent's difficult history raises pressing contemporary questions with which Christians must wrestle. There are mothers, like Mary, who cradle their babies at night while fearing that they may never grow up. How do we minister hope in a world where random gun violence may strip a family of a beloved child?

There are those who are hungry and cannot afford shelter from the cold; those who find themselves, like Mary and Joseph, on life's journey when the unexpected happens and there is nowhere safe for them to lay their heads. How do we make a commitment to helping the stranger, the traveler, the homeless, and the most vulnerable?

There is an edict from the halls of empire, like Herod's, which places a value on certain lives but sentences others to a lifetime of profiling, surveillance, and tracking. How do we fight against injustice and refuse to participate with the forces, realms, and authorities that see some as inferior or marked for death?

Yes, the Advent story is about expectancy, about the Christ Child who was born and the Anointed One who shall return. But Advent is also about how we live in the world, how we model our lives after the One who was made flesh and who chose to live, breathe, work, love, and move among us. The Advent story, in all its complicated history, points us to the miracle of incarnation, embodied by a tiny bundle of humanity cradled in the arms of a loving mother. Perhaps when we examine our own histories, even the parts we would rather forget, we'll also see the ways that God has walked with us and cradled us, through trials and terrors and through powers and principalities. Perhaps we'll see that God is walking with us still.

What's the most indelible image of the season, the one that should be seared in our memory as Christians? Maybe it's not the beatific scene of the nativity, a sleeping infant cradled by an apparently well-rested mother and surrounded by reverent visitors. Perhaps images of refugees seeking sanctuary, of the unhoused searching for shelter, and of the outcast striving for recognition are more faithful to the story of a God who journeys with us through the most difficult moments of our personal and collective histories.