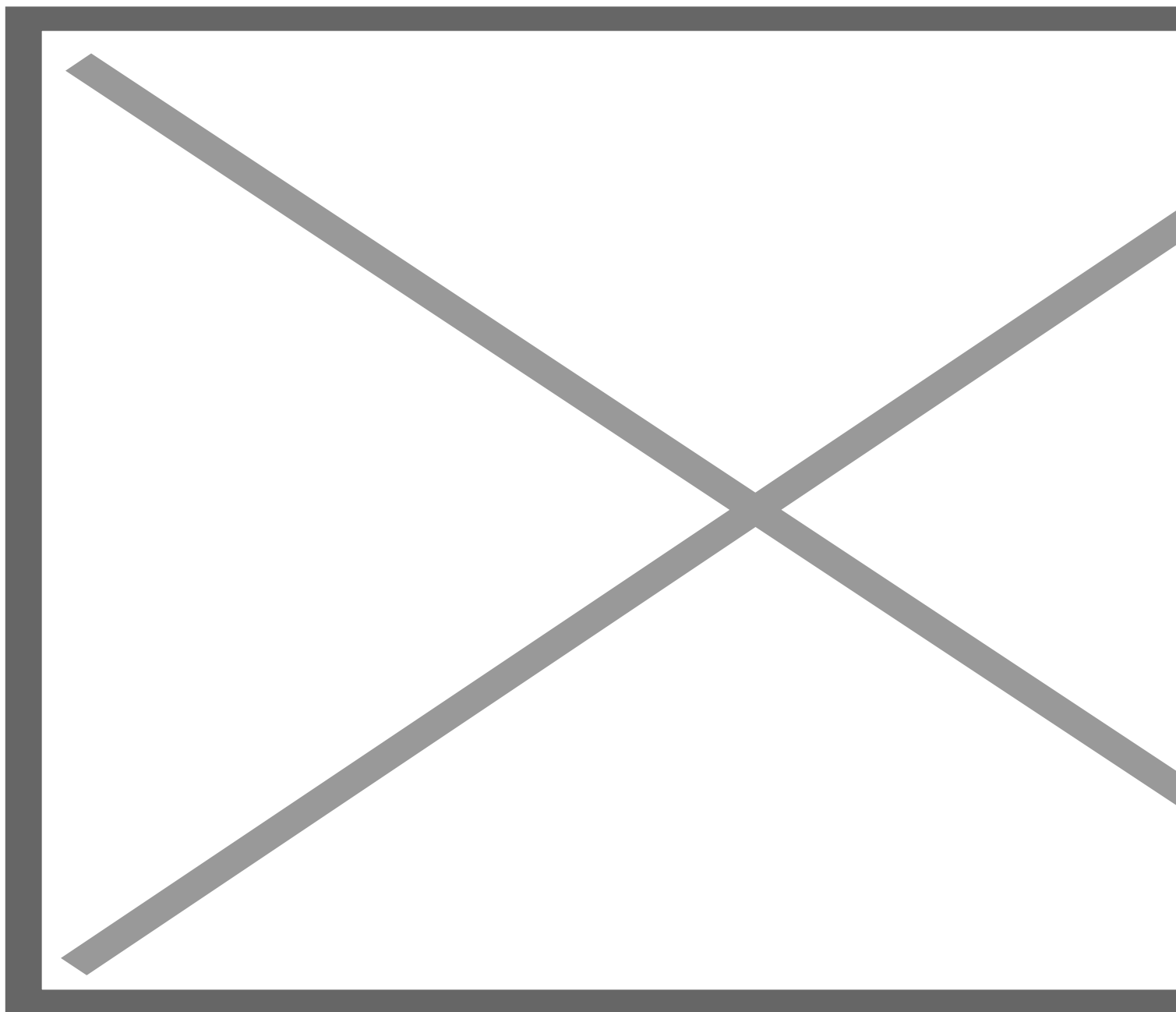


Sing Christmas carols during Advent. Put up the tree before Halloween.

God's RSVP has no date or time.

by [Brandon Ambrosino](#)

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Century illustration (Source images: Unsplash)

My Christmas tree has been up for a while—since before Halloween, in fact. Many people have strong feelings about that, not least church people with a healthy respect for the liturgical calendar. Christmas, they reason, comes at a certain time. We can't celebrate it too early, certainly not before Advent, the four-week season of preparation that leads to Christmas Eve. To put up a tree and a nativity scene well before Halloween is to ignore the ancient wisdom that teaches us that Christ comes at an appointed time.

But of course, such an appointment is only clear from this side of the timeline. Christ has been born, and that means something good for our world, no doubt. But that something good can only be made out in reverse, by starting with Jesus and working back through his own faith tradition with help from the Jewish Scriptures that formed him. This, in fact, is what the infancy narratives are up to: offering us imaginative ways to make sense of this baby's meaning for us by connecting different aspects of his birth—his delivery in [Bethlehem](#), his sojourn in [Egypt](#), the [star](#) from Jacob—to Israel's history with God. But we must be careful not to reduce these narrative details to a category that we uncritically call "prophecy fulfillment." Jews, to whom these scriptures were first given, don't believe their texts point to Jesus. That doesn't mean Christians can't reread these texts in conversation with Jesus, but we should keep in mind that our interpretations are what C. S. Lewis called "[second meanings](#)." All writers, even biblical ones, say and mean more than they say and mean. And so it makes sense Christians find surplus meaning in texts like "For unto us a child is born." But again, this meaning only becomes clear after, perhaps long after, the child is born.

It might seem to go without saying, but liturgical calendars are also worked out in reverse, after the celebrated events have played out. Constructed backwards, celebrated forwards. This is one of the tensions inherent in our calendar. The other is that the liturgical calendar prepares us for a future that cannot be prepared for. Our Christian hope is that God will one day step in decisively to disrupt all our timelines. No calendar can prepare us for that day. God will visit us like a thief in the night, like an unanticipated lightning strike, like a laughing spell that overtakes you at the very worst moment. God's sent out save-the-dates, but where one typically finds information about the exact timing of the party, we find only the words "Keep watch!"

We know neither the day or time—nor do we know exactly what to expect. We know the future will be Christ-shaped, that it will look and feel and sound like our bizarre first-century friend, who poured out his life in love and service to all. Beyond this, however, we can only imagine what life will be when God finally becomes all in all.

Which is to say: Put up your Christmas trees before Halloween. Don't keep your mangers empty until Christmas Eve. Keep singing Christmas hymns in February. God has already visited us on Christmas. His next visitation might well be April Fools' Day. We know neither the day nor the hour. Nor do we know what form his coming will take. He's already presented himself in the form of a baby. Perhaps he will choose to end history in the form of an undocumented housekeeper.

The point is, we shouldn't be too careful with our liturgical calendars. Insofar as they tune us into the cosmic rhythm of life, they help form our religious sensibilities. But if these sensibilities become too hardened and rigid, if, without realizing it, we come to expect God to show up right on schedule, in the precise manger we've prepared for him, then we've lost the plot.

Christmas, after all, is a celebration of God choosing to surprise us. The best way to keep this Christmas spirit is to expect the unexpected, even when we order our lives with help from the liturgical calendar.