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(Dreamstime/Goory)

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Around this time of year, I grumble about the lights and decorations at the malls and in neighborhoods, about the Christmas music that will have to be endured for more than a month, about the incessant sales that urge us to buy stuff we and the recipients of our gifts don't need.

If I were the pope, I would get together with other Christian leaders and try to change the date of the Christian Christmas, conceding Dec. 25 to Walmart, Amazon and Macy's. They could proceed with their sales and promotions and we could quietly celebrate the birth of Jesus at another time.

Am I a Scrooge? I don't think so. I dislike this time of the year not because I'm against the joy of Christmas expressed in gift-giving and reunions of family and friends, or because I dislike the happiness brought to some of our children this time of year. I would like Christmas trees and the decorations if they all went up a few days before Christmas and if they were truly meaningful.

Each year, the holiday seems to slip further and further away from its meaning. It is a thoroughly secular and commercial holiday pretending to be religious, presided over by a fictitious fat man with a beard who is said to bring piles of stuff to kids we are inadvertently teaching to be greedy.

The irony is that we Christians are complicit in this mockery. We enthusiastically join in. Jews, Muslims and non-Christians may feel envious about all the attention on Christmas. They may not see that the feast of Jesus' birth has been so thoroughly sabotaged that its true celebration must seek refuge in churches along with the immigrants we're so eager to be rid of.

Is it because our perception is that it's one of those issues, like nuclear war and global warming, over which we have no control? Is it because the tide is so strong we couldn't possibly swim against it? Or is it that our ties to societal norms are much stronger than our religious ties?

Or maybe it's a more fundamental problem. The true meaning of Christmas is among the most unbelievable of our beliefs, perceived by many as absolutely absurd. Yet, the most awe it produces from many of us is a good yawn.

Christmas is about the author of life, the creator, the God who is said to be in us and around us and "stretching" to beyond the ends of the universe, becoming one of us

and doing so in the most astonishing way.

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Most Scripture scholars agree that the "infancy narratives," as they describe the Bible's stories of Jesus' birth and early childhood, are mostly mythical. But they're beautiful myths, and like our own family stories, the details don't matter. The authors used folk traditions, the only means available to them, to teach that Jesus' birth was an event of cosmic proportions.

Through the genealogy, the story of the virgin birth and the beautiful story about the manger amid the shepherds, they were trying to express the awesomeness of what happened, something that seems lost on many of us.

Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Spirit" because he is Emmanuel, "God with us." To me, that is what's hard to grasp, that God would do such a thing, that because of Jesus's birth, we can call him "Father." That is, indeed, incredible and well worth celebrating.

And that's what upsets me about Christmas. Somehow, "Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer" and "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus" just don't capture it.

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