Culture



(Unsplash/Adrian Korte)



by Jonathan Tomick

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My favorite Christmas song isn't a Christmas song. You won't hear it on the radio after "Jingle Bells." You won't sing it at Mass along with "O Holy Night." But if you rummage through the back corner of your closet, dig out that crinkled cardboard box with your first crush's name on it, and charge up the Microsoft Zune you can't quite bring yourself to throw away, you just might find it.

It's "Better Days" by the Goo Goo Dolls, first released in 2006.

"Better Days" may not technically be a Christmas song, but it is about Christmas. After a grand piano intro that washes over you like nearby church bells, the opening lines go, "And you asked me what I want this year / And I try to make this kind and clear / Just the chance that maybe we'll find better days." I'm 33 years old, but as soon as I hear those words, I'm 15 again. It's overcast and cool, and I'm just pacing back and forth in my high school parking lot, my headphones in, enthralled.

My favorite Christmas memory isn't a Christmas memory. It's a memory of being a teenager and discovering a band 18 achingly long months before their next album release. It's about buying, renting and downloading every record they've made in the past 20 years, then listening to the 10-second tease of their new single for months until the whole track finally drops. It's about searching for songs that make me feel whole.



The Goo Goo Dolls are pictured performing September 2013 in Norfolk, Nebraska. Jonathan Tomick's favorite Christmas song is the band's song "Better Days," first released in 2006. (Wikimedia Commons/Fr. Jeff Lorig, CC-BY-2.0)

That's what being a teenager is all about: searching for meaning. In music. In ourselves. In our relationships. In our faith.

That’s what Advent is supposed to be about, too: searching for meaning. In the coming of the Christ child. In the faith of a young woman and her husband. In the adoration of shepherds and Magi alike. But as an adult with a wife, two children, multiple jobs and an ever-growing list of people to buy gifts for, I mostly spend the weeks leading up to Christmas searching for a way to survive.

My favorite Christmas Scripture isn't a Christmas Scripture. It's the verse in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus says, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). Teenagers are children, too. They may not carry the same aura of innocence and purity that "little children" do, but I think there's something about our adolescent selves worth

resurrecting this Christmas.

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When you're 15, you don't just listen to a song once and move on. You listen to it over and over until you've learned every word. And you don't stop there. You find the acoustic version and the remix. You find the music video. You find the live version. You find the demo track. You find the bad cellphone recording of the concert where they play the bridge a little differently than they've ever done before. And you revel in every new discovery.

Listening to music as a teenager is a crazed, desperate, passionate search for new meaning, new experiences and new ways to share it all with the people in your life. That's not how I would describe my typical experience with Christmas. But what if it were?

This Advent, I'm wondering what it would look like for me to engage with this season like a teenager, to seek new meaning in stories, Scriptures and songs I've heard hundreds of times. When I was a teenager, I didn't care that I'd heard "Better Days" or "Iris" or "Flat Top" a hundred times. When a new version arrived, I listened to that one a hundred times more, finding glory in every nuance of that specific recording.

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I want to seek newness with the obsessive ferocity of a teenager who just found the music that resonates with their soul. Honestly, I don't really know what that means for my 33-year-old self this Christmas, but I know it won't happen with "Frosty the Snowman" or "Silent Night." I need "Better Days." I need "Iris." I need "Flat Top."

The second verse of "Better Days" goes, "And the one poor child who saved this world / And there's ten million more who probably could/ If we all just stopped and said a prayer for them." When I was 15, this struck me as a beautiful idea, if also a little sacrilegious. At 33, it sounds like an instruction: Stop and pray, not just for the

children in my life — my kids, my niece and nephew, my students, my neighbors — but also for the kid inside myself. The teenager. The one who is still searching.