

Advent Conspiracy: Worship Fully

November 16, 2014

Luke 2: 1-7

This sermon was preached by Pastor Kurt Jacobson at Trinity Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, WI

Dear Friends, grace and peace be with you all.

This passage of scripture seems a bit strange to hear this morning, doesn't it? Here we are in mid-November. It's still 11 days to Thanksgiving and over five weeks to Christmas Eve. Yet, before us is the central scripture reading for Christmas.

This morning I want you to conspire with me to turn Christmas upside down this year and do this season differently. How that might look for your life is up to you. But we're going to give you some ideas in the next two weeks. And even as I say this, I know that some of you are out of the gate already in the race to Christmas with all its activities, shopping and traditions.

Now, I know many of us are thrilled that the political campaign commercials are over – even if it means that Christmas shopping ads have taken their place. Today we're hearing about which big box retailer is opening Thanksgiving day in hopes of getting us in sooner for the great Christmas shopping buys even before the turkey comes out of the oven.

Because the American-style of this season starts earlier than ever, I wanted to be the first to get you into the real story of Christmas. For some years I've wondered what benefits there are for starting the holiday season earlier. Does a longer season help us keep Christ at the center of it? Do we experience a more soulful celebration of Jesus' birth by starting all the activities sooner? Or does the length and intensity of the season wear us out, cause unnecessary stress and burn out so that many people find the biggest joy of Christmas is just to wake up and see it be December 26? So, this year you get the biblical story first, and for good reason. I want the heart and soul of Christmas to be at the top of your list influencing all the things you do and choices you make in the next five weeks.

So, here we are together as a Christian community – the Church of Jesus Christ – the organization that first brought attention to the birth of Jesus) and we are forced by American commercialism of Christmas to get into the season already. Well, we're not really going to get into the season yet – so don't go looking to sing carols or see Christmas trees for a while yet. But, my colleagues and I want to conspire with you, in hopes that Christmas brings something better to your soul, your relationship with God and your celebration of this season. This conspiracy is to encourage you to substitute consumption with compassion and put center stage the true meaning of Christmas -- before you start into this season. Then, by the time Christmas Eve arrives you'll have experienced more than piles of presents under the tree, crammed calendars and less than merry attitudes about time ahead with the relatives.

Here's what you do in the Advent Conspiracy: you keep the story of Jesus' birth first and substitute consumption with compassion by practicing four simple, but powerful, countercultural concepts – worship fully, spend less, give more, and love all.

Are any of you fans of Charlie Brown? Have you watched “A Charlie Brown Christmas?” In it, Charlie is shopping for a tree and finding himself dismayed at all the fake trees. Finally, he spots the only real tree on the lot and he buys it. When his friends see him with this tree – Charlie is ridiculed and called names. In a moment of exasperation he asks a question we would do well to ask ourselves every day in the next five weeks: “Isn’t there anyone who remembers what Christmas is all about?” Let’s watch Charlie: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLzGawC_Pt4 0:00 to 1:49

As Linus shares the reason for why any of us make anything of the season, he puts, at center stage, the profound hope of Christmas – the good news of GOD come to live with us.

Question: What would happen if instead of being caught up in all the shopping, parties, and preparations of the season, we put at center stage of our Christmas preparations, the good news of God come to live with us? What if, for the next five weeks, we entered the Christmas story as participants – not simply bystanders who hear the story on Christmas Eve – after we’re all worn out and sick of the music, the decorations and shopping? What if, in our personal preparations for Christmas, we said NO to the commercialized American version and YES to more GOD and Jesus in our preparations? Here’s what I think would happen: We would understand a God-centered Christmas more deeply and richly, therefore, worship more fully, spend less, give more and love all.

Since worshipping fully is the starting point of this Advent Conspiracy, let’s take a fresh look at some of key players in the true story of Christmas. Sorry, Santa, Rudolph, Scrooge, and George Bailey have to take a back seat to the real players in the real Christmas that you’re going to focus on this year.

The bible shows us wonderfully how certain people found their hearts and souls shaped by God and then how in turn they responded worshipfully. So we’re going to look at six key plays to see how the profound Good News from God took center stage in their life. Then I’ll pose a question for you to consider for your own life. I’m hoping you’ll choose at least two attributes from these people to model in your Christmas preparations.

1. Mary Offered. (Luke 1:38). Chosen to be the mother of Jesus, Mary was a teenage girl engaged to carpenter named Joseph. I love how God uses nobodies to do something great. When the angel Gabriel appeared to her to tell her that she would become pregnant and give birth to Jesus, she was troubled and afraid. But Mary responded with words of offering: *“I am the Lord’s servant...may it be to me as you have said.”* Luke 1:38

Mary shows us that worship leads us to let go of our own agendas and offer ourselves to be agents for God’s purposes in human life.

Q: This Christmas, what agenda do you need to let go of to offer yourself in service to God?

2. John Jumped. (Luke 1:44). Mary’s cousin Elizabeth was pregnant about the same time. She gave birth to John – who we come to know as John the Baptist. When Mary arrived and greeted her pregnant cousin, Elizabeth got a kick. She said to Mary: *“As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears,*

the baby in my womb leaped for joy.” (Luke 1:44): There’s something about being in the presence of Jesus that should cause us to jump for joy, isn’t there?

John shows us that worship can lead to joyfulness.

Q: What’s holding you back from jumping with joy just to be in the presence of Jesus?

3. Joseph Obeyed. (Matthew 1:21-24). Joseph has a problem. His fiancée Mary is pregnant, and the baby isn’t his. Though he could have flipped out and exposed Mary to public shame and punishment, his plan was to end things quietly. That’s when an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him not to break his engagement. He’s told that Mary’s baby was conceived by the Holy Spirit and should name the baby Jesus. Joseph amazes me for his obedience. The bible tells us “*When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him & took Mary as his wife.*” V 24 Joseph reminds us that the call of God isn’t necessarily easy or conventional or rational, but it is always right – and God will give us the courage to follow, if we’re willing to obey.

Joseph reminds us that worship leads to obedience.

Q: How might all the activities, spending and choices you make this holiday season better obey God’s purposes for your life?

4. Angels Adored. The angels have a major role in the story of Jesus’ birth. They’re the ones who give the good news of great joy to the shepherds. Right after that announcement, we read this: *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’*” Luke 2:13-14 The angels explode with praise as they contemplate how peace will now be given to people who were fearful about trusting to the goodness of God amidst the troubles of this life.

Worship brings peace through confidence in God’s faithfulness.

Q: How might worship bring peace to the areas of your life that are in disarray?

5. Shepherds Moved with Haste (Luke 2:15). The shepherds lived on the outskirts of towns and were shunned by most people. They’re the first people to get the news from the angel. Don’t miss this – God loves the overlooked! Choosing them to be the first to hear the good news of Jesus’ birth, we read in Luke 2:15 that they are very eager to see him: “*Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.*” These guys on the fringe of society, who were used to slowly walking with their sheep respond eagerly. In verse 16 we read: “*So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.*” And then, after seeing Jesus, verse 17 tells us that “*When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child.*” Worship changed these guys into eager believers and tellers of the Good news!

Q: What will the haste in your Christmas preparations tell and show others?

6. Wise Men Bowed As the Christmas story ends, we read about some highly educated men who studied the stars for signs and noticed a new star, which was understood to announce the birth of a

Savior. When they finally find Jesus we know that they gave expensive gifts to Him. But what did they do first? *“On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts.”* Matthew 2:11 To bow is a sign of submission ... a gesture of respect. These noble men bow to Jesus to acknowledge his holiness. In our Christmas preparations, God is more interested in our bowing than the bows we put on our gifts. Coming into the presence of God and bowing to the holiness born for us is to worship fully.

Q: How will you bow to God this holiday season – and not to the commercialization of Christmas? How will your gift giving reveal to others your honor and worship of God?

When we keep the profound Good News of God center stage, we will worship Christ more fully this Christmas.

So – step one in the Advent Conspiracy: worship fully. Choose today to take on two of the worshipful attributes seen in the key players of Christmas: Mary who offered, John who jumped, Joseph who obeyed, the angels who adored, the shepherds who hurried to tell, or the wise men who bowed.

** The idea for this series and some content comes from a book by Rick McKinley, Chris Seay, and Greg Holder called, “Advent Conspiracy: Can Christmas Still Change the World?”*