

“Worship Fully”

The Advent Conspiracy, part 1

John 12:1-8

[59] Happy New Year! No, I haven't gotten my holidays out of order. Today is the first Sunday in the Advent Season, a special time of expectation of the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ. As we prepare for Christmas, Advent gives us the opportunity to reflect what it was like to wait for the birth of Jesus, and remind us that we believe he will return. The calendar may not flip over until January 1st, but for us, today is another chance God has given us to be renewed. After all, everyday can be a new day with Jesus Christ. So, Happy New Year!

[60] Would you pray with me? And as I lead us, I invite you to extend your hands out, palms up, ready to receive the new things God wants to give you.

Lord God, thank you for being constant in our lives. Even as seasons change and the world moves, you are the steady rock we can depend on. Thank you for your love and grace, which are new every morning. Prepare our hearts and minds as we study your Word, and may we be obedient to your Spirit's calling. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

[61] I have a confession to make today. I am messing with Christmas this year. I have gotten a little tired with the holiday stress. Do you know what I mean? The hustle and bustle, the commercialism, and the arguments over when it's OK to start singing Christmas carols and put up the decorations. (Before or after Thanksgiving?) Whether or not nativity scenes are legal to place on government property. I am tired of trying to find the perfect gift for someone. The perfect gift probably doesn't even exist.

I remember the first time that the stress of Christmas hit me. I was about 10 years old, and I decided to buy a gift for every person in my family. That list included Mom, Dad, 2 brothers, 4 grandparents, 14 aunts and uncles, and 14 cousins. 36 total people! I was completely overwhelmed. I think I actually cried when I went to the store to try to shop.

Now, some people look forward to Christmas, but others dread it. What about you? What joys or concerns do the holidays bring to you? Let's share some

answer together. (gifts, food, family, fun, games, shopping....grieving, spending, stress, relatives you don't get along with, too many people.)

On the one hand, we drive our economy with our shopping, and that can be a good thing. But is that all there is to this season? Are we so focused on the business of Christmas that we have forgotten the purpose of Christmas?

[62] Last month, the members of Painesdale UMC completed a study called The Advent Conspiracy. We shared good memories of Christmas, and some of the frustrations and worries many of us feel this time of year. I am leading the same study on Tuesday nights online here at Grace.

This study has really challenged me. I mean, I like gifts. I actually like surprising people with good gifts. Yet the thing that resonated most with me in this study was the longing for a sense of meaning. Commercialism doesn't provide lasting joy. For Christmas to be truly special, and for my focus...our focus, to return to the manger. To experience the Incarnation anew. The real purpose of Christmas is to celebrate the birth of Jesus, whom we worship and adore. Let us begin again, and ask ourselves, what does it mean to fully worship Jesus?

[63] There is a story in the gospel of John, chapter 12, about a woman who fully worshipped Jesus Christ. Her name was Mary. Jesus had dinner with his disciples, Mary, her sister Martha, and her brother Lazarus. Think about the mayhem this dinner involved. All twelve of Jesus' disciples. All of Mary's family, and probably more. That's a big holiday meal. And the pressure was on; everything was supposed to be perfect.

Mary interrupted this perfect family meal in order to worship Jesus, the way we should all year round, and especially at Christmas. In the middle of the dinner, Mary took a marble jar of expensive perfume, broke it open and poured it out on Jesus' feet. She not only “wasted” the oil, she ruined the jar itself. The scripture says the fragrance filled the whole house. (John 12:3)

Can you imagine someone taking a quart of Old Spice aftershave and dumping it on the floor right in the middle of your turkey dinner? The house must have smelled powerful. The dinner guests must have been shocked. The perfume ruined their scrumptious dinner. They were so stunned, nobody said anything at first. Mary's recklessness, her sacrifice, her risk would made the other's gasp – if

they could do so without sneezing. Who would break the silence? Who would address this awkward situation?

Who else, but cranky cousin, Judas. See, Judas was caught up in the “system”. He was worried about the money, worried about what was appropriate, worried about ruining the “perfect holiday.” He didn’t care about Jesus. And he certainly didn’t care about Mary. I’m not sure he cared about anyone but himself. Judas was like an uncle with the bad mood, the one who just wants to watch TV, the one whom nobody likes to talk to, because he never has anything positive to say.

What a contrast to Mary. Mary knew what worship was all about: Jesus. She went to the Son of God, her Lord and Savior. She refused to let anything get in the way of honoring and loving him. Forget convention. Forget doing things by the book. Forget doing this holiday the same way it has always been done. In her humble gift of anointing, she showed everyone what they all knew they should have done, but didn’t. [64] In Matthew 26, in another version of this story, Jesus says, “She has done a beautiful thing for me...I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will be told, in memory of her.” (Matthew 26:10, 13) Mary gave a gift from her heart. She kept Jesus in the center of the story. She took a risk. She worshipped him fully.

Have you ever given a gift that was completely forgotten a month later? I have. I have received things that really didn’t matter, not to me or the giver. But what Mary did is preserved in the scriptures forever.

[65] See, sometimes we are like Judas. We only consider the monetary value of the gift in the present moment. Our hearts are far from Jesus. We just want to make sure we spend the same amount on each child. “If so-and-so got a new bike, then the other kids should at least get a snowboard.” That’s how many define Christmas. By money. By consumption. By what we get. By spending thousands of dollars on gifts and decorations that do nothing to lead someone to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[66] The truth is, Christmas is about God’s gift to the world. A Savior. Jesus is the ultimate gift that keeps on giving. Jesus died on the cross to save the world. Jesus honored Mary because her action showed everyone that Jesus was worthy

of her worship. Her gift was costly, extravagant, because it was given to honor Jesus.

Church, who has a birthday December 25th? (Jesus!) So have you thought about what gift you will give Jesus this year? Is that too radical? That’s what this Advent Conspiracy is all about. We can be like Judas, and continue living frustrated, empty lives, or we can be more like Mary, and remember the true purpose of this sacred holiday.

The best way to enter the Christmas story is to spend time reflecting on the meaning of Christmas. God saved the world in the most unexpected way, with a baby born in a tiny village over 2,000 years ago at the other end of the world. He grew up to reveal himself as the Son of God, die on a cross, and rise again, so that we might live forgiven and righteous in the eyes of God. That’s an amazing story.

[67] How can we worship this Savior and tell his story anew? I encourage you to visit www.adventconspiracy.org to find some ideas. But there are hundreds of other ways to make this Christmas more powerful and memorable. This might be your first, fifth, or fiftieth Christmas, but how can you make it be different? How can you make it be more worship-full?

Maybe it is by inviting someone to Christmas Eve worship. Maybe it is by volunteering some of your time. Maybe your present to Jesus is to simply find someone who needs to be shown his love. There are so many ways to share the good news.

[68] Christmas is our story to tell. One of the pastors in the Advent Conspiracy was bemused by the controversy of whether store clerks are allowed to say, “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Holidays”. His point is that the church should not be outsourcing the gospel. It’s our story to tell. How have we experienced God? How can we share the true meaning of Christmas? We have Advent devotions. We have invitations to our Christmas Eve Candlelight service. Maybe each of us simply needs to commit to having an authentic conversation with someone this year, in which we intentionally share what Christmas means to us.

This is a conspiracy. It goes against the grain of our society. It is extravagant. It is unusual. It might make people look at you a little weird. It’s OK. You get used to it.

The challenge for us is to consider how we use our time, money and energy to celebrate this amazing holiday. It is Jesus’ birthday. We need to make this holiday about him.

[69] My birthday, by the way, is December 22nd. One of the ways I am personally celebrating is by adopting a charity for my birthday. Marian Mattila from Painesdale is going in on this together with me, since we share the same birthday. We picked the Youth Development Fund at Compassion International as our gift to Jesus. According to their website, “Compassion's Youth Development Program provides youth ages 12 and older with customized training and educational paths according to their own unique potential, and God-given talents and purpose.” If you want to contribute, you can go online to compassion.com and click on the “Develop a Future Leader” under “Ways to Donate.” I’m excited about using this season to do something for youth in the name of Jesus.

[70] That’s just one example of how I hope to worship Jesus more fully this Christmas. My prayer is that you will find your own unique way to do the same.

Memory verse

John 1:14 - “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Reflection questions

1. What was your favorite childhood Christmas memory? What and whom did it involve? Was it related to the story of Jesus’ birth?
2. What is the most stressful part of Christmas for you? Why?
3. When you hear the phrase, “Worship Jesus more fully,” what images come to mind? Is this something you desire to do?
4. What commitment can you make this Christmas so that the “busy-ness” of the holiday doesn’t overcome the true “reason for the season”?

More information and ideas are available at www.adventconspiracy.org