

The Advent Conspiracy
Part I
WORSHIP FULLY
“Consumer Christmas or Christ?”

This morning is the first Sunday of Advent. Our Advent series this year is entitled “The Advent Conspiracy” and the sub-title is “Can Jesus still change our world?” We chose the word “our,” as in our world, to mean both our own selves – “Can Jesus still change us today?” and “Can Jesus still change the world in which we live in?”

The word “conspiracy” conjures up some different feelings for us. For many, it’s mostly negative. I looked up the word “conspiracy” means “the act of conspiring.” That helps us define it, doesn’t it? Or another definition, “an agreement between two or more parties/persons to commit a crime or accomplish a legal purpose through illegal action.” That sounds bad! But the word conspire doesn’t always have to be bad. The word conspire also means “to act or work together.” A conspiracy can be good or bad. But there is also another element in most conspiracies, whether good or bad, and that is “to plan or plot secretly.” Most conspiracies are done under the radar. An example of a bad conspiracy is that of Bernie Madoff, who conspired to cheat thousands of investors out of billions of dollars, over many, many years, in which he was able to go undetected, even from many who were very close to him, including his own family. He admittedly did it for almost 20 years, investigators think it was perhaps up to 40 years, while committing the largest fraud in U.S. history. Or the sex abuse scandal at Penn State is an example of an evil conspiracy. Certainly conspiracies can be bad.

But a conspiracy can be good too! A contemporary theologian and philosopher, a deeply spiritual man by the name of Dallas Willard wrote a wonderful book several years ago (1999) entitled “The Divine Conspiracy.” In that book he makes the claim that God has been conspiring since the beginning of time to bring a people back to Him. Willard says that “God is up to something very big in this world, and in your own heart. You can miss it if you’re not careful or you can seize the moment and grab hold of it.” “The Advent Conspiracy” and the “Divine Conspiracy” are really the same thing.

“The Advent Conspiracy” is the story of the wondrous moment when God entered our world to make things right. You see, God was conspiring to bring Jesus into this world, long before this world was even created.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world, . . . Ephesians 1:3-4a (NIV)

Colossians, chap. 1 describes Jesus this way:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, . . .Colossians 1-15-17a

He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.

1 Peter 1:20 (NIV)

Before that it was hidden. Sure sounds like a conspiracy to me. I am not sure we even fully understand how big this Advent Conspiracy really is. It is the greatest story ever told and it should change everything about us – including the way we celebrate Christmas. This year we want to experience “the Advent Conspiracy” in a good way.

But we really can't do that unless we are aware of the other side of the “Advent Conspiracy” that is in our face each and every day. It starts earlier and earlier every year. And that is the way our consumer driven culture puts pressure on us to celebrate Christmas. Why is it a conspiracy? Because the purpose is usually hidden. They want us to think we are celebrating Advent and Christmas the way God wants us to celebrate them when we really aren't. While the period of Advent was originally designed to draw us closer to God prior to celebrating Christmas each year, the bad side of the Advent Conspiracy distracts us from God. And who is it that is conspiring with all the retailers and our consumer driven culture to distract us from what Advent and Christmas is all about? Well, you draw your own conclusions. But Satan, the devil, often works in secret, hidden, under the radar, to distract us from our relationship with God. You see, we're caught between two worlds, “Consumer Christmas” and “Christ?” We really can't hold the two together.// What is it which drives our consumer Christmas? Money!

Jesus said:

“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”

Matthew 6:24 (NIV)

So this year we would like to challenge one another to see Advent and Christmas differently. Perhaps different from how we have experienced it for ourselves in years past, and to see it differently than most of our culture sees it today. Lots and lots of people in this country who celebrate Christmas and yet have no personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Interestingly, as our “consumer Christmas” is getting longer and longer, the time we spend celebrating Advent has gotten shorter. The celebration of Advent actually dates back to the late 300's. Early on the Advent season started in the beginning of November. It was marked by a time of fasting, confession, prayer and reflection/meditation on God's word. Eventually it would be reduced to five Sundays and then four. The word Advent comes from the Latin word “adventus” which means “coming” or “arrival.” Advent is the time of year in which we prepare ourselves for celebrating Christ's coming – both His first coming and His second coming. If you were following along with the Scripture readings for the week, some of them focused on Jesus' 2nd coming. Advent is meant to be a celebration for what God has already done through Christ and a time of preparation and anticipation for what is to come.

I did some research on the internet to try and discover the history of the Advent season. I came across this article by a man by the name of Dennis Bratcher entitled *The Season of Advent: Anticipation and Hope*.

“The focus of the entire season is the celebration of the First Advent, and the anticipation of the return of Christ the King in his Second Advent. Thus, Advent is far more than simply marking a 2,000 year old event in history. It is celebrating a truth about God, the revelation of God in Christ whereby all creation might be reconciled to God. That is a process in which we now participate, and the consummation of which we anticipate. . .

“In this double focus on past and future, Advent also symbolizes the spiritual journey of individuals and a congregation, as they affirm that Christ has come, that He is present in the world today, and that He will come again in power. That acknowledgement provides the basic knowledge that we live ‘between the times’ and that we are called to be faithful stewards of what is entrusted to us as God’s people. So, as the church celebrates God’s inbreaking into history in the Incarnation, and anticipates a future consummation to that history for which ‘all creation is groaning awaiting its redemption,’ it also confesses its own responsibility as a people commissioned to ‘love the Lord our God with all our heart’ and to ‘love our neighbors as ourselves.’”

The Season of Advent: Anticipation and Hope, by Dennis Bratcher

Advent is a big deal and how we celebrate it makes all the difference in the world. There was a time in which it was celebrated much like Lent. Historically, the primary color is purple.

The color purple is a color of penitence. Penitence is the acknowledgement of our human sinfulness and falleness, because without a deep sense of our own sinfulness, there is no need for a Savior. Purple is also the traditional color of royalty to welcome the Advent of the King. The color purple of Advent was meant to be the same color as used during Lent, pointing to the important connection between Jesus’ birth and death. Jesus’ birth, the Incarnation, cannot be separated from the crucifixion. Much like Lent, Advent was designed to be a time of deep reflection on what God’s coming to earth in human form means in each of our lives. It is not just an event in history, it is still applicable in our lives today!

This year as we look at some of the central figures in the first Christmas story, try and put yourself in their shoes. How would they have experienced that first Christmas 2,000 years ago? Christmas should change everything about us. It should change who we are, whose we are, what we are here for, what we are to do. It should change our priorities. It should turn our world upside down. It did for those who did recognize Jesus on that first Christmas, whether it be Mary, or Joseph, the Magi, the shepherds, or Simeon. They were different from one another, but they also had a lot in common. What was it about them that helped them recognize who Jesus was and to respond to Him the way they did? Every single one of them worshiped Him fully. They knew what His coming meant in their own lives, and for the world around them. They were willing to give up everything to worship Him, whether it be their pride, their most valued possessions, their reputations.

If someone were to ask you what you worship during Advent, what would you say? Hopefully, each of us as Christians would say “Jesus Christ, that’s who we worship during Advent.” Which would be the right answer but would it be truthful? Simply saying that worshiping Jesus is the desire of our heart doesn’t make it truthful. Worship is not just what we say we worship. We worship what we spend our time and energy on, what we spend our money on, how much time

we spend with God, and how much time we spend with others. That's what we will worship during this Advent season.

"The invitation to join the *Advent Conspiracy* is a call to remain in the gospel of Jesus and worship him – no matter how strongly the cultural demands of Christmas pull at us."

"The *Advent Conspiracy*" is designed not to make us feel bad or guilty, perhaps because of how we have celebrated Advent and Christmas in the past, it is about entering into the story more deeply with a desire to worship more fully.

So each of the Sunday's, no matter what the main theme: Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More, or Love All, we will read the Scripture focusing on one or several of the main figures from the first Christmas story, who will light our Advent candle, to see how they worshiped God, because they had recognized that their promised Messiah had come.

Jesus came that first Christmas in the midst of great sin and suffering. He comes today in the midst of our great sin and suffering. If we can't recognize our need for a Messiah, a Savior from our sins and suffering, than Christmas means very little, or nothing at all, other than an opportunity to give and receive gifts, which is not what Christmas is about. Exchanging gifts with one another is a western culture adaptation/phenomena. Christmas is about recognizing and acknowledging the gift that God has already given us in Jesus Christ.

What was it about Mary that made her so special? That God would choose her to give birth to the long awaited Messiah. Well, it sure helped that she came from the right family tree, and that the one she was pledged to be married to was a descendant of David. It helped that she was a virgin. Didn't help so much when she and Joseph had to try and explain what had happened. But her innocence and her naivety helped her to recognize what was happening. Her humble surroundings, most likely a peasant, helped prepare her for accepting the Christ child into her womb. "Why me, she asked?" The angel replied, "why not you?" The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with a child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus" (Luke 1:30-31). God chose Mary because He knew how she would respond!

Her response is found in v. 38, "I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said." "May your will be done." How many of us have really said that to God? "God, whatever, may your will be done in me."

Mary's response? She worshipped Him fully! Mary's song is known as *The Magnificat* because she magnifies God. In contrast to Mary and her circumstances, most of us today are not the weak, poor and humble lifted up by God of whom she speaks. We are the powerful, the rich, the self absorbed. Jesus said, "blessed are the poor, the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek and humble," those are the ones whom God has reached down to earth in the form of His Son, Jesus, to lift up. Because of the culture we have been born into, we have some work to do to make ourselves like Mary.

“Mary announces that God is here! She carries God in her womb. The mystery is mind-bending. Mary was not so much the mother of Jesus because she carried him within her womb for nine months and gave birth to him. She was the mother of Jesus because she did the will of the Father and became Jesus’ first and ultimate disciple. Stretching out his hand to his disciples later on in life, Jesus declared: “Here are my mother and my brothers, anyone who does the will of my Father who sent me is my brother and my sister and my mother.” “For Mary it was a greater thing to have been Christ’s disciple than to have been his mother and she was more blessed in her discipleship than in her motherhood” (St. Augustine).

Every single one of us has the opportunity to be Mary’s. To carry around the Messiah, called Jesus, within us, and to do the will of God in our lives. If we would first humble ourselves, let go of our earthly attachments, take on the innocence of a young child, and be willing to do whatever it takes for the glory of God.

Mary is addressed by the angel Gabriel as “the highly favored one.” All that means is that she is the recipient of God’s grace. Mary is about to receive freely the special favor of God. She is meant to be the picture of those who receive God’s free gift of grace on the basis of not anything we have done, but only by His divine initiative.

Each of the Sunday’s during Advent will include a time of reflection at the end of the message, as we play a song which speaks of the thoughts and feelings of the primary figure(s) for the day. How that person or persons might have felt that very first Christmas and Advent. A time for us to reflect on what it might mean for us today?

Prayer of Confession – Advent

*Loving and merciful God, as we await the coming of Jesus,
we confess that we do so with divided loyalties,
scattered attention and idolatrous hearts.*

*We want to welcome a baby but not surrender control of our lives
to a Lord who expects our allegiance.
We like the idea of having something and someone to believe in
but do not want those beliefs to demand a change in our behavior.*

*We are inspired by brilliant stars, angelic song and the magi’s gifts,
but are not interested in the risky business of sharing the good news.
Our lives are cluttered with parties, packages, and pageantry,
and in the midst of it all, we have misplaced the truth of the Incarnation –*

*that you have come to be with us, to know us and be known by us,
to dwell not just with us but within us, for the sake of all creation and the world.
Forgive us, precious Son of God, we pray, and restore us the joy of being yours.
Amen.*