

**“Worship Fully”**  
**Series: Advent Conspiracy, Part I**  
**Luke 1:46-55, Matthew 2:1-12**  
**November 29, 2009 ~ First Sunday of Advent**

When I was a child, on Christmas morning when we would come downstairs to see what Santa had left beneath our tree, the first thing we had to do before opening any Christmas presents was sing. My mother would guide us to our Nativity scene where we would sing “Happy Birthday” to baby Jesus. That was her way of remembering and reminding us that Christmas is first of all about the birth of Jesus and only secondarily about Santa and the tree and the presents. “Jesus is the reason for the season,” right? And yet, even as we say that with our lips, our lives—our credit card bills, our bulging calendars—tell another story. The consumption and consumerism that is the story of Christmas in our culture has become more our story than the baby in the manger.

If you look around—and even in the lives of Christ-followers—it appears that Santa and the tree and the presents *are* the *real* reason for the season. And as much as we grouse about it, it’s hard to fight it. It’s everywhere. To insist that this season is really about Jesus and not just about the “Christmas spirit” and ‘ho-ho-ho’ is counter-cultural. Have you ever gotten to Christmas Eve and felt like you missed it? Sometimes, sitting in church on Christmas Eve, a hushed sense of wonder washes over me for the *first time* in the season, probably because that’s the first time I’ve stopped to take it all in. That’s sad. Many do not even come to church on Christmas Eve because of family dinners that traditionally take place on that night.

Now, it’s not that celebrating Christmas with family is a bad thing. It’s just that it’s not the real reason for the season. It’s not what we are supposed to worship, at Christmas. Many of us complain that “Happy Holidays” is now the proper greeting to extend one another. We grumble about that, but really, if we, His followers, don’t even keep Christ in Christmas, how can we expect the culture around us to do so? And keeping ‘Christ in Christmas’ or celebrating ‘Jesus as the reason for the season’ is more than just singing “Happy Birthday, Baby Jesus” before diving into the giant mass of presents under the tree, or wearing a “Jesus is the reason” pin while fighting the Black Friday crowds at the mall. It’s not that those things are bad. Please hear me: it’s not that those things are bad. It’s just that there’s so much more. So much *more* to be worshipped and given and received and shared. So much *less* we should do and spend. It’s so easy to miss it. And sadly, I think we do.

So this year, we are inviting you to enter into an Advent Conspiracy with us. Today is the first Sunday of the season of the church year called ‘Advent.’ Advent is a season of preparation for the coming of Jesus into the world. ‘Advent’ is from a Latin root that means ‘coming’ or ‘arrival.’ During the four Sundays before Christmas, we remember that Jesus came into the world as a helpless baby. But not only that: We also remember that He promised to come again, at the end of time, to gather His people to Himself. But not only *that*: Jesus *still* comes. So we should be looking to see where and how Jesus comes to us each day. But mostly, I’m afraid we miss it. Because we’re focused on the baby in the manger. Or the ornaments on the tree. Or the crowds at the mall. Or getting just the perfect present for Aunt Sally. Or the cheapest mp3 player for our kids.

But that's not what Advent is really about. Advent is a time to remember, celebrate, and prepare our hearts and minds and lives for the coming of Jesus into the world. *Our* world. Our personal, individual worlds. Advent is a preparation time. And I know: you've got *lots* of preparations to make! But that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about preparing your heart, preparing your soul, preparing your *life* for the coming of Jesus to *you*. But in the face of a culture that worships at the altars of consumerism and consumption, especially at this time of year, it's hard to stay focused on the preparations of Advent for very long.

And what's a 'conspiracy?' Well, 'conspiracy' has several meanings, such as: an evil, unlawful, or surreptitious plan formulated in secret by two or more persons; a plot. Generally, a conspiracy is some kind of bad or illegal plot. But one of the definitions of conspiracy is this: 'combination in bringing about a given result.' The result we want our Advent Conspiracy to bring about is a different experience of Advent and therefore Christmas in 2009. The Advent Conspiracy "is about entering the story of Jesus more deeply with a desire to worship more fully. It is not enough to say no to the way Christmas is celebrated by many; we need to say yes to a different way of celebrating."<sup>1</sup> It is not enough merely to lament the consumerism and secularism that have taken over the Christmas season in our culture. We must do something to counteract them. We must decide to do something different this year. Here's what we'd like to propose that together, we decide to do this year:

Worship Fully—Christmas begins and ends with Jesus, of course. We know that, we just don't *live* that.

Spend Less—thereby freeing your resources for things that truly matter.

Give More—of your presence: your hands, your words, your time, your heart.

And Love All—the poor, the forgotten, the marginalized, the sick, in ways that make a difference.

These four themes will be the topics of our messages this Advent, as well as our Sunday Morning Adult Ed classes. Several of our small groups are using this curriculum for their study during this season.

So here's the question for today and this week: What would it mean for you to worship more fully this Advent? I really want you to think about that. What would that look like for you? Our hearts are formed by what we worship. Love is expressed in what we worship. We worship what we love and we love what we worship. Worship is a heart issue. My deep desire is for all of us to learn what it means to worship Jesus more fully this Advent: to worship Him with *all* our heart, *all* our soul, *all* our mind, *all* our strength.

Now, we should not expect the world to applaud us for this. In fact, people around us may be threatened or disturbed if we decide to celebrate Advent as the season it was meant to be. This shouldn't surprise us because the *first* coming of Jesus into the world threatened the powers that be and disturbed a lot of people. It's a familiar story. See if you can hear it with fresh ears and a fresh heart today. Matt. 2:1-12.

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<sup>1</sup> Rick McKinley, Christ Seay and Greg Holder. *Advent Conspiracy*, p. 17.

The Magi had traveled many miles. And you know, it couldn't have been that comfortable riding a camel that far. But they were seeking one thing: V. 2: *Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and have come to worship him.* The Magi came to worship. It took great effort. They traveled a great distance. The church was not just down the street. They risked robbers and wild animals. They must have experienced fatigue. No GPS; just the star. Yet they pressed on. And when they found Jesus, they were 'overjoyed,' Matthew tells us. And they bowed down and worshipped Him. These were evidently wealthy men of some status and influence. Not just anyone would be granted an audience with King Herod. But here they were, faces to the ground. And they opened their treasures and presented them with gifts. Gifts of value. Gifts fit for a king.

They didn't worship only with their lips or their bodies. They worshipped with their wealth. These guys were all in: heart, soul, mind, strength. And it threatened the powers that be. It disturbed the reigning king. God's coming changes things. God's coming threatens the secular powers that rule our lives. In her song of praise, Mary puts it this way: Luke 1:52-53. "He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty."

The picture on the cover of the bulletin says a lot, I think. Take a look. "The time of year when worshipping Jesus should be the easiest is often the hardest."<sup>2</sup> It's so easy to get caught up in the consumer side of Christmas, the popular side of Christmas. I mean, it's the American way, right? After all, it's good for the economy to worship at the altar of the mall. The wise men traveled far to worship the King. Who or what does the shopper worship? [and not all shoppers are women, by the way.] How far are we willing to travel to get the best deals, find the perfect gift, the best party dress, the most spectacular light display? Who or what are we worshipping this season? Not only what we *say* we worship—what our lives actually *show* that we worship? What story do we tell by how we celebrate Christmas? What are we announcing to the world with our worship?

You see, there are two fundamental elements to true worship: revelation and response. First, God reveals Himself to humanity. The angel comes to Mary with the "good news" of her impending pregnancy. The Magi follow the star to find the King. God reveals Himself. Our response to God's revelation is worship. Mary praises God: Luke 1:46-49. Even though what the angel has told her must have seemed impossible and was *certainly* at the very least inconvenient, Mary is totally in awe of what God has promised to do through her. Her praise and worship is passionate and filled with wonder and awe at the goodness of God.

Martin Luther: "To know God is to worship Him." In other words, once we come to truly know God, we cannot help but worship Him. Worship is our human response to knowing God. God reveals Himself, showing us who He is and what He does. Inviting us into a relationship with Him. And as we come to know God, we cannot help but fall down in awe and wonder and worship. To dance and sing and even shout for joy and amazement at how great God is. Isaiah 12:6.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p 34.

So if you have trouble worshipping God—really responding to all that God is with all that you are—take some time this Advent to ask yourself if you really know God. Because to know God is to worship Him. Maybe for you to worship more fully this Advent, you need to spend some time getting to know Jesus better. Read through one of the gospels and spend some time reflecting on what it means for you to live in a relationship with God through Jesus.

This is truly what the Advent season is about: remembering that God wanted us to know Him in such a personal way that He didn't send a servant, He didn't send another prophet, He didn't send a miraculous sign. He came Himself. He sent His own Son to be one of us, to live among us. And God *still* reveals Himself. *If we will but see. If we will make some space in our stressed-out hearts and over-scheduled lives to recognize His coming in our midst.* This is what Advent is really about. God comes. But not only must we recognize God's presence. Like the Magi, like Mary we must respond: falling down in awe and wonder at the goodness of God, the love of God, the power of God, the faithfulness of God that He would come to people like us.

I saw an ad in the newspaper this weekend that said this: *Come to wonder. Come to be amazed.* It was an ad for Longwood Gardens. Friends, that should be our advertising this season: *Come to wonder. Come to be amazed.* God revealed Himself and His purposes to a teenaged peasant girl. Mary was not a person of status in her society. She was a nobody from nowhere, really. Be amazed this Advent: God uses nobodies. Even you.

God revealed Himself to the “wise men.” Wealthy, learned men. But they were not wealthy, learned *Jewish* men. The Magi were Gentiles. Outsiders to the covenant people of God. How ironic that it was the outsiders who recognized the coming of God, while the insiders – Herod, the chief priests and the teachers of the Law – they missed it. Be amazed this Advent: sometimes it is the outsiders who see God more clearly than we, His own people, do. God can and does reveal Himself to and through outsiders.

What would it mean for you to worship more fully this Advent? I'm not inviting you to do more, probably you need to do less. I'm not encouraging you to add stuff to your already full December calendar, but maybe to consider taking something off your calendar so that what remains allows you space and time to wonder and be amazed at the goodness and greatness of God. At the incredible fact that God came and still comes. That God reveals Himself personally to each of us and invites us to know Him and experience His power and purposes in our lives. My prayer is that we would all have a fresh encounter with God this Advent. That we would worship more fully and enter the story more deeply than we ever have before.

This is not just going to happen. You will not wake up tomorrow with extra time to spend in prayer or reading the Bible or contemplating the meaning of the star or the joy of the shepherds or the obedience of Mary or the gifts of the Magi. You are going to have to decide—to *plot*, if you will—to bring about the desired result of worshipping more fully this Advent. Maybe you need to try a new posture for prayer: bowing down, lying prostrate, standing with hands raised. Maybe you need to try giving a new kind of gift, a gift of lasting worth, rather than a gift that's going to be returned or need to be repaired.

Maybe we really do need to sing more. Not “Happy Birthday, Baby Jesus.”

“Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee...”

“Haste, haste to bring Him laud.” Laud means praise, honor, worship.

“O come, let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him...”

We worship what we love and we love what we worship. Worship is a heart issue. “Let every heart prepare Him room.” This is the meaning of Advent. It is a time for *every heart* to prepare. For *every heart* to make room. For every heart to wonder and be amazed at a God who would love us so much that He would come. That He would leave the splendor of heaven to be born a helpless baby in a cave stable. Let every heart prepare Him room. Jesus came, He *will* come, He *still* comes. And that changes everything. I pray that it will change your celebration of Advent and Christmas this year.