

Advent 1**Luke 21:25-36****The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller*****Advent Conspiracy: Worship***

The story of Jesus' birth is a subversive story. It's a story of a love so profound and a Kingdom so revolutionary that it was meant to turn the world upside-down and inside-out. It's a story of promise and hope that is still changing the world to this very day.

So, what happened? How did the celebration of our Savior's birth get morphed into a season of stress, traffic jams, shopping lists, and busyness? And when it's all over, many of us are left with presents to return, financial debt for months to come, and this empty feeling that we somehow missed the real point of it all.

Is this what we really want out of Christmas this year?

Amber (my wife) and I play the "What if..." game. What if this... then what would we do?

What if... Christmas became a life-changing event once again?

What if... we turned our focus back to the birth of Christ?

What if... we could actually trade our season of stress for a season of celebration and create unbelievable memories with family and friends? We can!

But for that to happen we will need to change the status quo. We will need to swim against the current. We will need to behave counter-culturally. In a word, we will have to enter into a conspiracy. That's exactly what the season of Advent is all about. This year we will join hundreds of churches around the country in what is being called "The Advent Conspiracy." You can check it out at www.adventconspiracy.org.

The Advent Conspiracy has four movements, four parts that have the potential to not only change our holiday, but to change our world. And who doesn't want to make this world a better place?

Here are the four movements:

1. Worship Fully – Advent 1
2. Spend Less – Advent 2
3. Give More – Advent 3
4. Love All – Advent 4

It sounds simple, doesn't it? Maybe it will be. I'm guessing that, for many of us, we're going to learn that we've bought into a holiday habit that is far less than revolutionary.

This Advent Conspiracy is going to be harder than we think. So let's agree to do it together. We're going to need one another. Together I believe we can make a real difference in the world.

Today we begin with the topic worship – worship fully. What does it mean for us to worship fully this Advent season?

In our reading from Luke this morning, Jesus is talking to his disciples about the time of his promised return. Here's the scene:

It was the last week of Jesus' earthly life. He and his disciples were leaving the temple and some of the disciples commented about how beautiful the temple was. While we don't know exactly what the temple looked like, history describes a magnificent campus of buildings, and porches, and patios taking up one-sixth of the city of Jerusalem. The foundation of the temple was so solid that some of the original footings and walls remain to this day. The people of Jesus' day were convinced of the permanence of this magnificent structure, not only because of the stability of construction, but because it represented God's presence among the people. The temple and God were seen as one.

So Jesus turned his disciples' focus from the buildings to the divine Builder, from human plans to holy plans. Jesus says, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." Jesus is saying that everything, the whole creation, will one day disappear.

His point is this: God's presence with us will never ever be found in a physical structure like a building. Our hope is not in the things of this world. Our assurance of God's presence is in Emmanuel, "God with us" in Jesus. It's a spiritual thing.

One of my favorite hymns goes like this, "Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness," his sacrificial love for us. What a great reminder as we move into the Advent season. I hope you will see beyond all the stuff the world has to offer and worship God who is among us.

I hear people (okay I hear church people) complain that the culture has pushed Jesus right out of Christmas. I've said it myself sometimes. I've come to realize that nothing has the power to push Jesus out of Christmas. He is here!

Christmas is the celebration of God with us, Emmanuel. For God so loved the world that God entered humanity, and became one of us, a baby born of flesh and blood. Jesus is here and nothing can change that. Jesus is here.

The question is, do we have open eyes to see him, open hearts to love him, and an open desire to worship him fully this year? The truth is we all worship something. We were made to worship. It's part of our human DNA. And the Christmas season offers us more "stuff" to worship than any other time of the year. The challenge is for us to focus our hearts and our minds on the One who alone is worthy of our worship: Jesus.

This in the first movement in the Advent Conspiracy, to focus not on the wrappings and trappings of the holiday but to worship Jesus fully to worship the One who makes this season so special. Worship has the power to transform this season. Worship has the power to transform each one of us. Worship proclaims Jesus and Jesus alone to be worthy of our thanks and praise. Worship proclaims Jesus and Jesus alone as the source of real life, real hope, real joy.

By worship, I mean more than what we do here on Sunday morning, although it includes that. Worship is a mindset and a lifestyle. Worship happens as we breathe in the grace, the mercy, the love of Jesus and breathe out honor, and thanks, and praise to our Lord.

Worship happens as we realize (no matter where we are) what God has done for us and we live with grateful hearts. Worship happens in water – at the font, in bread and wine – at the table. Worship happens when we meet Jesus in our reading of scripture. Worship happens in our small groups, when we sense the Holy Spirit alive and moving within us.

That's worship. It happens in silence. It happens in song. It happens in prayer. It happens in serving others. It happens in community.

During this Advent season the world has us breathing in so many things that our worship life gets choked-out by busyness and exhaustion. But when we worship Jesus fully we live against the cultural flow. We live the Advent Conspiracy.

This conspiracy goes deep. It would be tempting to assume that in order to carry out this Advent Conspiracy, we need to shun all the outer trappings of the season. That we need to skip the lights, forget the shopping, ignore the parties, and don't eat the cookies – I like the cookies!

Instead of rejecting these things, I'm suggesting we claim them and participate in them. Instead of allowing them to lead us away from Jesus, perhaps that can point us to Jesus moving our hearts and minds to a deeper, fuller worship of him.

For example: (Back to our "what if" game...)

What if... every time you saw candles or Christmas lights, you let them remind you of the One who has come into this world as the Light of the World? That might lead us to be a light to others.

What if... every time you saw the throng of desperate shoppers, or were caught in the throng yourself, you be reminded that by grace Jesus has already provided all we need for abundant life? That might lead us to a prayer of thanksgiving.

What if... every time you saw an opportunity to give to a charity, like the Salvation Army, you let it remind you that Jesus promised to be found in the least of these, our brothers and sisters? That might lead us to acts of generosity.

What if... every time you were tempted to eat yet another Christmas cookie, you let it remind you that we have already been fed by the Bread of Life? That might cause us to ponder God's abundant goodness.

What if... every time you heard a Christmas song, it reminded you of the very first Christmas carol sung by the angels to announce the birth of the Christ child? That might lead us to sing a new song for Jesus in word and deed.

What if... every time you went to a Christmas party, you saw that crowd around you as the very people Jesus came to save? That might lead us to build a friendship with someone, inviting that someone to join you for worship next Sunday or on Christmas Eve.

What if... we looked at everything that tends to overcrowd our days and dull our senses and used them to remind us of the One who has come into the world, the One we celebrate this season, the One who is worthy of our worship?

That would be a conspiracy. That could change our holidays. That would change our world. This is the first movement in our Advent Conspiracy. We are being called to a revolution this Advent season. Are you in? Amen