

Advent Conspiracy: Worship Fully

Luke 1:26-38; 46-55

December 1, 2013

Dan Hoffman

As you have already seen by the lighting of the wreath somehow December is upon us again and we are in the four weeks of Advent leading up to Christmas.

“Advent” comes from a Latin word that means “waiting” or “anticipating”, and that is what this season is about.

But what are we waiting for?

At Advent we remember back to the 400 years of silence from the last writings in the Old Testament to the birth of our Saviour, a time when people longed to hear God speak – having no idea that speak He would, with audible words, from the physical mouth of an actual person. The most surprising part being that the first sounds the God who spoke the universe into existence would utter would not be the pronouncements of a King, but the cries of an impoverished baby. The thought is incomprehensible.

As Philippians tells us

[Jesus], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:6-7)

The King of the Universe became the child of an unwed servant girl; born, not into opulent riches, but the poverty of a barnyard stable, in order that He would be able to empathize with our weakness,¹ taste our pain and ultimately take our place on the cross paying for our sin.

But at Advent we also remember that the story of Jesus is not confined to history. After He came back from the dead Jesus ascended to Heaven where He awaits the Father’s timing to return in victory. And before He left He promised that:

If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am. (John 14:3)

And so Advent is also a period of waiting for that second coming to become reality. Christians then are people living between two Advents, two comings. And these two periods of waiting define who we are and how we live – at least they should.

...

¹ Hebrews 4:15

In competition with this is the fact that we live in a world that serves another god. We live in a world where the largest and fastest growing religion is not Christianity or even Islam but Consumerism.

And I don't call Consumerism a religion flippantly. Religion is about identity, worship and becoming like our god. "Our hearts are formed by what we worship. Excitement, anticipation, hope – each of these emotions swells around the object of our dearest affect. We spend our time... energy [and money] on what matters most to us."²

And for non-church attending North America, the statistics easily show that the vast majority of our disposable income is spent on ourselves. But what about us within the church? Are we different?

Now Fort George is a generous church full of people who love God and recognize that all of what we have has been lent to us by God to be used for the growth of His kingdom. But because we live in a culture where we ingest the propaganda of consumerism every day we need to constantly refocus and redirect our finances to line up with what we worship.

In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us that there is a 100% correlation between where we spend our money and what we worship. He says:

Where your treasure is, there your heart is also (Matthew 6:21)

The question before us this Advent is "what god captures our worship?" This Advent is our heart sold out to the God who put on skin and lived among us, or does our excitement, anticipation and spending prove that the object our dearest affection is the same god our culture worships?

Looking honestly at the desires of our hearts can be scary, but kids don't suffer from this fear – and they project what we, and our culture, teaches them. So if you have children ask them what they are looking forward to most about Christmas and see what they say. Use their words as a mirror of your own heart.

So where's my family at? Well... at two Elliana, who has never had a Christmas she remembers, is already running around the house talking about "the goodies" she's going to get – she didn't get this from me. So believe me, I understand that culture's pressure on us here is huge.

As it has unfolded the Christmas season has become the biggest celebration in the religion of Consumerism of the entire year, and our malls are the churches of this new religion. Did you know that North America spends well over \$450 billion dollars every year on Christmas related things – advertising, gifts, decorations, greeting cards, celebration food – whatever.

² Rick McKinley "Advent Conspiracy: Can Christmas still change the world?" (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 2009. pg 32

That's a huge number, so let me put that into perspective for you. In 2009 the World Summit on Food Security held in Rome estimated that it would take roughly 10% of that, or \$44 Billion dollars, to solve world hunger once for all.³ That means if North Americans spent just 10% less on Christmas and dedicated the money they saved to fighting world hunger, life would be remarkably different for the poorest billion people in the world.

...

This year the title of our Advent Series is "Advent Conspiracy". A conspiracy is a secret plan to do something counter-cultural. Advent Conspiracy is a movement that started a little less than 10 years ago down in the States and has spread to thousands of churches across both Canada and the States in that time. Its goal is to encourage Christians to turn Christmas right side up again.

The first Christmas was the time God gave the gift of His presence to humanity, a gift that cost Him His life. So the invitation to join the Advent Conspiracy is a call to remain in the gospel of Jesus and worship Him with our finances – no matter how strongly the cultural demands of consumerism pull at us.

Instead of caving in to the pressure to buy presents for ourselves and those we love, Advent Conspiracy encourages us to use some of our gift budget to emulate God's gift by giving ourselves to the world around us.

So out in the foyer you probably noticed a display of giving opportunities. I encourage you over the next four weeks to go check out the display. There you will find alternative gift options. For example World Vision has a program where for \$50 or \$100 you can give farm animals like chickens or goats to third world families. World Vision will then send you a card describing what you bought, and you can give that card as a gift to someone you would normally buy a sweater or socks for. It's a way of turning consumerism into generosity.

...

Alright, would you turn with me now to Luke chapter 1 verse 26.

Advent Conspiracy has four topics that we will be covering. The topics are "Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More and Love All." And this week we are going to set the foundation for what Advent is about by looking at what it means to worship fully.

And to do that we are going to look at Mary's encounter with the Angel Gabriel who gave her the good news that the Saviour of the world would eat her cooking.

Luke chapter 1, verse 26.
[Read Luke 1:26-31; 38]

³ <http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread947426/pg1>

Mary's story begins in obscurity. Mary was just an average teenage girl engaged to a poor carpenter living in the backwater regions of the Roman Empire. And then out of nowhere God extended the invitation to her to be the mother of the Messiah.

When the archangel Gabriel showed up informing her that she had found favor in God's eyes you can imagine her surprise. How? How does a girl of 12 or 13 gain the favor of God? We aren't given the answer to this in Scripture, and probably the reason why is that it is irrelevant. The fact is God's favor is given undeservedly, never earned by good works. But her response at being chosen is evidence that God was already at work within her, preparing her for this favor.

And here is where we see the first aspect of worshipping fully. Mary risks to worship through obedience.

Now perhaps it doesn't seem like much of a risk to take the words of a flaming angel at face value, but we know from only a few verses before that it is very possible to doubt when face to face with a messenger from God.

In verses 5-25 we read about Gabriel coming to Zechariah six months earlier with a similar message:

Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. (Luke 1:13)

But instead of believing the words of the divine messenger, Zechariah responded:

How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years. (Luke 1:18)

How can I be sure of this?! Come on Zechariah – have visitations by angels become so common place to you that you need more proof than the words of Gabriel himself!

Perhaps we do well to cut Zechariah some slack at this point, because unlike him we have a book containing God's will for us and yet so often we still fall short of obeying it.

Either way, Zechariah doubted the words of Gabriel and the result was that he wasn't able to speak until the angel's words had come true.

But Mary doesn't reply the same way. While she too wonders how the angel's pronouncement will come into being, her ultimate response is obedience.

And worship always requires obedience. And of course this makes sense; a pledge to follow Christ is meaningless if it is partnered with a refusal to do what He commands.

There is no assurance of salvation for anyone who just “prays the prayer” and doesn’t do what Jesus said. Again in His Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us:
 Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.
 (Matthew 7:21)

Obedience is central to worship, and Mary worships in this way. She is quick to put her personal concerns on the back burner and says “I am the Lord’s servant.... May your word to me be fulfilled.”

...

The reality is that whenever we receive an invitation to participate in what God is doing we have the choice to obey or not.

And God is always giving His children, His disciples, His churches opportunities to act out our worship. So let me ask you, “how is God calling you to participate in what He is doing? We know what God’s will is – His will is that we expand His glory in the situations that He has placed us. So where has He placed you, and where has He placed our church? This is where we are called to look like Christ. The only question is will we obey?

Obedience is central to worshipping fully.

...

The second picture of worshipping fully we see in Mary’s life comes out of the song she writes in response to God’s word. Look down at verse 46 and following.

[Read Luke 1:46-49]

Mary’s song is one of the most beautiful expressions of worship found on anyone’s lips. In it her emotions burst forth with heartfelt words of adoration for her God who has been mindful of her.

But while there is a lot that could be unpacked from her words I just want to dive into a couple things. In the middle of verse 48 is this statement: “From now on all generations will call me blessed.”

And of course they have. While us Protestants generally play down Mary’s role in bringing Jesus into the world – I think for good reason – our Catholic brothers and sisters recognize that the blessing of becoming, quite literally, the Mother of God is extreme.

But one thing I think gets overlooked when thinking about Mary’s blessing is that it looked very different from anything any of us would consider a blessing.

When we think of God's blessing we usually are talking about things like an increase in our disposable income, or avoiding conflict that was encroaching, or passing a test we didn't study for, or having a roof over our heads and food on our tables. Basically when stuff happens to us that makes our life easier we call it God's blessing.

But for Mary God's blessing meant danger, shame, potentially losing her fiancée Joseph, and being looked down on by everyone around her. Being an unwed and pregnant teenager today is a big deal, but in the first century it was a lot bigger. It meant being kicked out of your family and basically left for dead – there was no social welfare system for single moms back then.

Can you imagine the struggle she would have had telling people she was pregnant and that it wasn't Joseph's baby? And when people asked her how she could let this happen can you feel the judgmental eyes that would have examined her when she told them? "I didn't do anything. God made me pregnant."

And yet, while all of this was running through her head, Mary's eyes of faith enabled her to see – and this is key – that **the opportunity to partner with God in His plans is the biggest blessing a person can have.**

...

We know what God's plan is. His plan is to expand His glory in this city, this country and this world. But we all know that standing up for our faith and inviting others to be part of it can earn us a heap of ridicule in today's world.

The reason I have shied away from sharing my faith many times is that I have thought that the price I would have to pay to be obedient was more than the reward was worth.

And we think this way because the world we live in is so tangible and hostile, and the reward seems so transparent and far off. Basically the world of flesh and bone seems more real than the spiritual reality Jesus calls us to.

The irony of course is that this is the opposite of reality; the world we now see is actually less real than the one God calls us to invest in. 10,000 years from now it will have faded to nothing and only what we have invested in the spiritual world will matter.

And this 12 or 13 year old girl catches a glimpse of this reality. While her world teeters on an edge, Mary understands that partnering with God in what He is doing will be a blessing the rest of the world for all time will acknowledge she had.

Fort George, my prayer for us this Christmas is that we will be a people who want, beyond anything else, to partner with what God is doing in our city and the world. Because true blessing is not evidenced by what we put under the tree, true blessing is the opportunity to be part of what God is doing around us.

...

So worshipping fully means obedience. And Worshipping fully means recognizing that true blessing comes from partnering with God.

The third aspect of worshipping fully we can see in Mary's life comes out of the rest of her song. We will pick it up in verse 50.

[Read Luke 1:50-55]

That's quite a song. Mary's words here are known as the *Magnificat* because of how she magnifies God, acknowledging His great love and deliverance for the least of humanity.

And it is the least of humanity that Mary says see God's blessing.

Throughout her song two groups of people are contrasted. Verse 51 says "[God] has scattered those who are proud"; 52 says "He has brought down rulers from their thrones"; and verse 53 says "[He has] sent the rich away empty." This is the first group of people Mary describes.

And these are contrasted with those who fear God receiving His mercy (in verse 50); the humble being lifted up (in verse 52); and the hungry being filled with good things in 53.

Basically the text says there are two kinds of people in the world and the contrast between them is stark and obvious. One group receives God's blessing while the other group, appearing to be blessed, is actually scattered and turned away. And Mary's theme here comes up over and over again in scripture. Just for example Proverbs tells us:

[God] has no use for conceited people, but shows favor to those who are humble. (Proverbs 3:34 GNT)

And yet the contrast between these two types of people is somehow lost on us. I say this because very few of us associate ourselves with the wealthy rulers Mary sings of – but this just isn't true!

The reality is that the poorest among us are dozens of times richer than most of the people in the world.⁴ Here's a graph of what this looks like.

⁴ All statistics in the following section taken from <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats#src1>

If you lined the world's 7.2 billion people up from richest to poorest and found the middle of the line – in other words the person numbered 3.6 billion – that person would be making a little more than \$2.50 a day. That works out to just over \$900 a year. If you climbed another 2 billion people towards the rich end of the line you would find that 80% of the world lives on less than \$10 a day – that's \$300 a month.

If you make 1000 dollars a month, only 10% of the world makes more than you, and if you make \$50,000 a year you are richer than 99% of all people.

While we in North America worry about rising cell phone bills, or the question of what to eat for dinner, hundreds of millions of people struggle with things like finding drinking water, food, housing and education for their children.

The statistics are just staggering. Here are a couple more:

There are roughly 2.2 billion children in the world. 1.9 billion of them live in the developing world.

Of those 1.9 billion, 640 million live without adequate shelter (1 in 3); 400 million live without access to safe water (1 in 5) and 270 million have no access to health services (1 in 7).

According to UNICEFF, 22000 children die each day from a lack of water or food.

The reality is that if you can turn on a tap, flick a light switch or open a refrigerator door you are one of the richest people in the world. Now please hear me, it is not sin to be as rich as you are, but there is a great responsibility attached to our wealth. Jesus tells us:

From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked. (Luke 12:48)

So here we find ourselves, people who want to do Christmas right, people who want to worship fully, and people who are rich. Throughout this Advent Season as we remember the Incarnation of Christ and look forward to His return we are going to look at how people in our shoes can be obedient with what we have been given. One passage we are going to end up coming back to is Paul's words to Timothy. He writes:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is *truly life*. (1 Timothy 6:17-19)

Friends, we are the rich of this present world, but as Mary knew true blessing from God – or “true life” as Paul calls it – has nothing to do with how much money we have, and everything to do with who receives our worship. This Advent season ask yourself who does my holiday spending say that I worship? And if it isn't the God who put on skin and gave Himself for your salvation then make a change.

2000 years ago Christmas changed the world. God the Son put on human skin and moved into our neighbourhood giving us the gift of His presence. Today that same Son of God has placed His Spirit within us and given us the mandate to join Him in infiltrating our world with His Kingdom.

There is a conspiracy afoot to use Christmas to transform the world again. Are you in?