

An Advent Conspiracy: Worship Fully
Isaiah 9:6-7
Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
First Sunday in Advent
Woodbury UMC
November 27, 2022

As we move between scripture, and music, and preaching, I invite you all to join me in taking three centering breaths.

By doing this, we help ground ourselves in our bodies. This is the sort of thing you do regularly if you are interested in mindfulness of any kind. I ask us to do this today because it connects what we are doing today to what we've been doing for a month.

Prayers, presence, gifts, service, witness. I think that four of those are a little more obvious to most people. Four of these are more action oriented, while presence is more a state of being. By doing this, we just made ourselves a little more fully present here, now. Not only that, but it is evident to me that presence is a non negotiable precondition for worship.

I mean, what is worship? What counts as worship? I suspect we would be able to debate that for a while, maybe without consensus, but maybe we would all agree that you need to be paying attention in order to worship. You can't worship while texting, can't worship while multi-tasking. And of course, there are many many things competing for our attention, working hard to peel our attention away from everything else. Worship involves

resisting all of these. Our advent study begins by pointing out the many, many things trying to grab our attention in the name of Christmas, but in reality — are doing everything they can to get our attention AWAY from Christmas and onto other things. (There is a book that goes along with this Advent sermon series, so if you want to explore more deeply, you should look into that.)

That word “conspiracy” is sure provocative, right? A conspiracy is a group agreeing to do something that is unlawful, or something that is not allowed. The allegation being made is that we all celebrate and love Christmas, within certain parameters; observing Christmas outside those parameters marks you as out of bounds, doing what is just not done. If several of us opt out of what is expected and intentionally observe Christmas differently, that would be a conspiracy.

In the first pages of the first chapter, it begins making its case back at the birth of Jesus, noting that as far as we can tell, the most important thing ever to happen, happened with just about nobody noticing. Not only that, but many people were on the lookout, expecting God to do something. But their attention was on other things. That chapter ends by noting that the idea the authors offer is pretty simple. My concern is that people may see the **simplicity** and mistake it for being **trite**. Nothing could be further from the truth. The simplicity belies many ramifications that reverberate in world changing, dangerous ways.

Our scripture today is one of several from Isaiah that are all over our Advent and Christmas celebration as they proclaim God's acting in the person of Jesus as fully man and fully God. And when God did do something, they missed it, their attention focused on other things. The implication, of course, is that the same thing keeps happening in our own time. This time of year, we remember the miracle of the incarnation between parties, and gatherings of all kinds, and decorating, and shopping, and writing cards, and so many other things that are not bad at all — but they do make the case that we can only really focus on so much at once. Everything cannot be a priority, our brains don't work that way, so we choose.

The idea in the Advent Conspiracy is about intentionally letting go of activities and traditions that actually take our focus away from God during Christmas. That's it. That is a really simple sounding idea.

How do we actually do this? To help guide us through this process, there are four tenets, or principles we follow: **Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More, Love All.**

- We **worship fully** because Christmas is about Jesus. If we get this right, our actions and our words come from a place of true worship.
- We **spend less** because we know that participating in more commerce is not the way to celebrate our Savior. By spending a little less on ourselves during Christmas we are able to more joyfully give to others in need.

- We **give more** of ourselves because this is the way of Jesus. God gave us his Son and now it is our turn to reflect that same selflessness to the world. We share our time, talents, and presence with the people we love.
- We **love all** because we have been loved first. We believe that the poor and hurting of our world can be reached by God through the way we choose to celebrate Christmas.

That brings us right back to the first idea, that the state of being fully present as irreplaceable is we want to be able to fully worship. Without that, the rest falls apart. Remember that in the past few weeks, I spoke of presence in five different ways, including being present to yourself, present to the world, and presence to the experience of God all around you, everywhere? If you can do this, you will realize that Worship is not defined as something that happens when you are in church. Worship has to do with **the state of your heart**.

If we can do this, then the way we spend, give, and love will radically change. This would no longer be frequently done out of obligation. Instead, you do it for a very specific reason. You do it to intentionally drop anything that keeps you from being fully present in the wonder of Christ's birth. For example notice what you're spending your time and energy on this Advent. Is it drawing you closer to God or is it distracting you from something else?

This probably sounds like something with a foregone conclusion, a platitude. Let me share something to dissuade you of that idea. Last Sunday I presided over the charge conference for the UMC of Litchfield and Bantam, since the pastor there is a longtime friend. In going through their paperwork, I thought I spotted a typo. The 2022 budget for outreach and missions was about \$150. The 2023 budget for outreach and missions was \$6,000. Not a typo! What I learned was they had recognize that most of their time, energy and money was going into upkeep of their building—so they sold the building. They now meet in a masonic lodge, don't own any property, and this has completely revitalized this congregation. They are excited to focus on outreach and mission in a way they've never been able to do before!

That's amazing, right? We know we are supposed to do outreach. But not like that! Not at the expense of our building! People won't come! Yet in this case the congregation is vibrant and healthy, grateful for God's providence.

What happened? Consider what we know about churches that close or merge. For a church to do that, they must really have been in lousy shape, half dead, a place no one would want to be. That stance assumes you will only act boldly when you don't think you'll get anything else out of it personally. If you have a position of strength, you would never consider doing something as foolish as giving up your building, right? You don't sell the cow if she's still giving milk, you don't give away the tree if it's still bearing fruit, and you don't consider giving up your building unless you have no remaining options, right?

Well, let's go back to our own United Methodist Annual Conference. We are now focused in cooperative parishes. How might we do more ministry and better ministry? As always, we understand that question by being as clear as possible about understanding the purpose. What's the goal? If it is to transform the world, then it will take all we have to have any chance of accomplishing anything. **Are we willing to give all we have, if that's what it takes to really reach people in the name of Jesus?** See what I mean? It sounded like a trite idea, but that simplicity means cutting out all distractions, in a season built fully on distracting us as much as possible. If we clear out that space, what's to be done with that room? It would allow us to worship more fully — and from that comes everything else.

Am I suggesting that we look at our attendance and financial realities and conclude that we too should sell out buildings? I am not. (Pastor, it kind of sounds like that is exactly what you are suggestion.) I am not. Why not? Because we aren't the UMC of Litchfield and Bantam, we are the Woodbury United Methodist Church, and God has equipped us with a totally different set of gifts and graces, with a totally different history, in a community with totally different needs. We are not a cookie cutter people! We are distinct, and it is up to us to figure out what God wants us to do here, not mimic what others are doing. This is not something you can copy off of the other kid's homework!

The bigger point might be about understanding what it means to be all in on God, what that looks like for us, stripping away anything that keeps us from doing that. Worship fully, as a way of approaching life. Let everything you do with your life be an expression of gratitude and awe, in relationship with your creator, at all times.

That's aspirational. That is really hard to do. But God isn't asking us to be perfect. God is perfect, so that's covered. God is asking us to be in relation with him, and if you can live a life of worship, then you are on your way.

May it be so. Amen.