

“ADVENT CONSPIRACY (#4): WORSHIP FULLY”

(Luke 2:1-20)

© 2010 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 12-24-10, Christmas Eve 8pm]

–I–

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read Text: Luke 2:1-20 and Pray.
2. It was Joshua’s birthday, and his family had worked hard over the last few weeks preparing for the day.

A–They’d sent out invitations, bought gifts, ice cream, cake and punch, and since he was having a theme party, his parents had even rented some costumes to help celebrate.

B–Well, the special day arrived, and mom and dad stood at the front door, welcoming each guest as they arrived one by one, and showing where to put the presents they’d bought.

C–And after everyone had arrived, they ate cake and ice cream, sang birthday songs, played games like pin the tail on the donkey, and they broke a piñata.

D–And everybody was having a great time – everyone, that is, except Joshua... who was sitting in a corner by himself, wondering if anyone was going to notice him at all.

E–You see, in the hectic pace surrounding this special day, Joshua’s family and guests had done all the “right things” – except that they’d forgotten to include the “birthday boy” in their celebration; they’d forgotten that *this* day was about *him*, rather than just each other.
3. Now, this story is fictional, of course. But isn’t it remarkably like what many of us tend to do at Christmastime?

A–We get so caught up in our holiday preparations – our shopping, cooking and attending parties – that we sometimes forget who this is all about and for – we forget to take time to include the “birthday boy” (Jesus).

B–Well, since late November we as a church have been sharing in a series called Advent Conspiracy in which we’ve been unpacking four counter-cultural practices that can help refocus us on the true meaning of Christmas so we don’t fall prey to the popular hype and stress of the season.

C–We’ve learned the value of “*Spending Less*,” “*Giving More*,” “*Loving All*,” and tonight I want us to focus on the final and most important practice of all: remembering to “**WORSHIP FULLY.**”¹
4. And tonight’s scripture reading illustrates this practice through the examples of each character within the original Christmas story.

–II–

5. For example, there's MARY – a poor, peasant girl who's willing to offer her *whole self* as a way of worshiping God.

A–Now, although she's *mentioned* in tonight's scripture, we really find her entire story recorded the chapter before, where an angel visits & tells her that she will bear God's son.

1–And in Verse 38 of Chapter 1 she responds, “*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*”²

2–In other words, in her worship of God, she didn't hold anything back, but instead offered her very *life, fully* in service to God.

B–It always amazes me, though, that our worship today often seems less than “full” – we worship when it's convenient, or doesn't involve too much time or money, or doesn't intrude too much on our “private” life.

1–For example, I can't begin to tell how many times as a pastor I've heard people say that they can't attend services on Christmas Eve because they're too busy!

2–Well, the last time I checked, the birth of Jesus IS the whole point of the holiday, is it not? So, missing worship on this night is kind of like having a birthday party and not including the birthday boy!³

C–And even though “worship” is much more than just singing some carols, or listening to a sermon, or lighting some candles as we sing “*Silent Night*,” it's part of what it means to invest our whole selves (like Mary) in an encounter with God.

6. But then there's also the example of JOSEPH, who worshiped by taking a *risk* in being *obedient* to God.

A–Remember that he wrestled with whether or not to take Mary – a woman pregnant out of wedlock – as his wife (something which was unspeakable in that day and time).

1–And yet, Matthew 1:24 tells us that after an angel appeared to him in a dream, “*When Joseph awoke... he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.*”

2–In other words, his worship took the form of obedience to God in spite of the risks to his own public reputation.

B–I wonder: what are you and I willing to risk in order to worship God?

1–Are we willing to risk our time, our money, our popularity, or our social standing in order to be obedient when God calls us to something that might be *costly*?

2–OR... do we tend only to worship when it's easy and comfortable – when it looks good on our business resume to be a church member (perhaps even a member of popular church that has *many* good business connections)?⁴

3–Well, Joseph’s worship risked much, and we’re called to worship in that same way.

7. Finally, today’s reading also gives us the example of the **SHEPHERDS**, who worshiped not only by *listening* to God, but also by *acting* on what they’d heard.

A–You know, some of the most popular Christmas carols celebrate the coming of the angels telling the glorious news of Jesus’ birth: “*Angels from the Realms of Glory*”; “*Hark! the Herald Angels Sing!*”; “*Angels We Have Heard On High*”; etc.

B–But do you remember what happened after the angels spoke? Listen again to Vss. 15-17: “*When the angels had left... the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place.’... So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger,...[and] they made known what had been told about this child....*”

1–Did you catch it? ...These shepherds didn’t just *hear* what the angels said – they also *followed up* by going to Bethlehem and telling what they’d experienced.

2–In other words, they didn’t just *listen* - they also *acted!* They weren’t just *spectators*, but *participants* in the message of Christmas!

C–Yet, how often do you and I do only the first part – we come to church, sing some carols, listen to a message, think “*what a nice Christmas service*”, but then go back home and *nothing* ever changes – we *listen*, but we don’t *take action*.

D–Well, the Shepherds did *both*, and their worship changed not only *them*, but inspired generations to come.

–III–

8. You see, my point tonight is that Christmas begins and ends with worship of the Christ child.

A–When we strip it all down, it’s not about the parties, or decorations, or the cooking or shopping, or even the family get-togethers that we all love to have. No, it’s about a small baby, born to a peasant couple that became the Savior of the world.

B–So, this Christmas, are you “*Worshiping Fully*”?

1–Like Mary, are you willing to give your whole self to God?

2–Like Joseph, are you willing to take risks in being obedient to God?

3–And like the Shepherds, will you not only *listen* to God, but also *act* on what you hear?

9. My prayer is that each of their examples will inspire and challenge every one of us to “*Worship [the Christ-child] Fully*” this night of nights!

10. [PRAY]

ENDNOTES:

1. “*Our hearts are formed by what we worship*” [Rick McKinley, Chris Seay and Greg Holder, Advent Conspiracy: Can Christmas Still Change the World? (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), p. 32]. So, what is it that we worship during the Advent and Christmas holidays? “Jesus”, of course, is the “correct” answer. But is it the truthful answer? Does the way we spend our time, money and energy show that we worship God incarnate? “*The things we desire are the things we worship. During Advent – a time of conspicuous consumption – we need to look closely at what we desire*” (McKinley, Advent Conspiracy, p. 33). We spend billions of dollars during the holidays, hoping (even if only unconsciously) that the latest and greatest gift will fulfill us and those we give gifts to. “*But the heart of what we’re truly searching for – hope, peace, love, rest, worship – is in Christ. [Yet] each time we try to meet our desire for fulfillment at the mall, we take another step away from the nativity. The time of year when worshipping Jesus should be the easiest is often the hardest*” (McKinley, Advent Conspiracy, p. 34).

2. This attitude of surrender continues in Luke 1:46-56 in Mary’s words of praise – what has come to be called “The Magnificat.”

3. Consider as an example of this mind set the words of the following poem titled “A Christmas Lament” (by Dean McIntyre, sung to the tune “It Came upon a Midnight Clear” or “O Little Town of Bethlehem”):

*I cannot welcome Jesus now, there isn't time enough;
With greens to hang and lights to string, and other Christmas stuff.
There's gifts to buy and food to fix, and silverware to buff.
I cannot welcome Jesus now, there isn't time enough.*

*I have to take the children to see Santa at the mall.
There's Christmas cards to write and mail, and guest lists I must call.
The garland isn't long enough — the Christmas tree's too tall!
I cannot welcome Jesus now, I just can't do it all.*

*The children's Christmas pageant at the church this Sunday night;
Five dozen cookies to be baked and costumes sewn just right;
The office party gift exchange, expenses out of sight;
I cannot welcome Jesus now, with time and budget tight.*

*The sermon says that Advent is the time I should prepare.
My date book says it's Christmas Day, and I don't even care.
I kept so busy doing things, I never was aware.
hat Jesus came unnoticed, for I had no time to spare.”*

[“A Christmas Lament” by Dean McIntyre, © 1993, 2004 by Dean McIntyre.]

4. “*Joseph reminds us that while the call of God isn’t always easy or conventional, it is always right – and God will give us the courage to follow if we are willing to obey. Like Joseph, when we act in obedience to God’s invitation – despite even the social cost – we help God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven*” [Rick McKinley, Chris Seay and Greg Holder, Advent Conspiracy: Can Christmas Still Change the World? (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), p. 41].