



“The Advent Conspiracy”
November 27, 2011
Advent 1, Year B
Mark 13:24-37

“And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”
It’s that time of year again. The stores have been gearing up for over a month now; the Salvation Army bell-ringers have taken their positions; holiday commercials have flooded our television sets; ready, set, go: it’s Christmas time. And, it’s not even December yet.

Over the next few weeks, we’ll be making lists, planning events, shopping, and gearing up for our own family celebrations. We will also experience frustrations, disappointments, and severe bouts of depression.

It will be part fun, part work, and part sheer drudgery.

CS Lewis remarked that there are in fact three “Christmases” in our culture.

The first is a high holy day in the life of the Christian church, and as such it has little appeal or meaning to anyone outside of the church, and certainly not to any secular, non-religious individual or entity.

The second is a holiday of merry-making and festivity, which may have some historical connection to the first, but now exists largely independent of the somber and serious order of the church’s holy celebration of Christmas. As far as CS Lewis was concerned, he fully approved of merriment, parties, and gaiety, and yet he considered such things to be of a private nature and not of much public concern.

But the third Christmas is a commercialized endeavor, the pure and only goal of which is to enhance the bottom-line of the nation’s shopkeepers. The complaints of this commercialized racket CS Lewis lodged in over 60 years ago seem rather quaint compared to the corporatizing of Christmas in our day.

It seems clear that in the 21st century, the first and second Christmases have been swallowed up entirely by the third.

It is odd, is it not, that we celebrate the birth of a humble Jewish peasant-king who sacrificed his own life for sin of the world with an extravagant display of vapid consumerism and mindless consumption.

The good news is that there is a revolt in progress, my friends: Just Google the words “Advent Conspiracy.” You will find a well-organized, grassroots movement to rebel against this third Christmas. The revolt they suggest for churches is a simple, four-fold plan. They encourage folks to “worship fully,” “spend less,” “give more,” and “love all.”

“Worship Fully” means to reclaim the fact that Christmas is not about gifts, not even about family, but it is about the worship of the living God who became incarnate in the Christ child.

“Spend Less” isn’t about shopping the sales and learned to spave; “Spend Less” challenges us to reduce our consumption and resist those impulses to spend beyond our means.

“Give More” encourages us to give more of the things that really count: give more time, give more to charity, give more presence—not presents with a T—but presence with and E-N-C-E!

“Love All” reminds us that this is a time of love, of kindness, of compassion and reconciliation.

Imagine if we made these the hallmarks of our Christmas celebrations inside the church as well as outside! The first Sunday of Advent seems like a perfect time to initiate our own revolt against the third Christmas.

Advent has long been a misunderstood and misrepresented season in the life of the church.

Most church folks assume Advent is simply synonymous with Christmas and refers to our great expectation of the coming of Christmas Day. But, Advent is much more about the Second coming of Christ and the coming of the Spirit of Christ into our present.

It is, honestly, a strange little season in the life of the church. This morning we read, not about the sweet story of the birth of the Christ child, but of apocalyptic cataclysm. The sun’s light is extinguished, the moon refuses to shine, and the stars fall from the heavens. And we are warned to “keep awake.”

Next week, we’ll hear about John the Baptist, that wild and strange character who ate locusts and honey and wore a camel’s hair shirt and a leather girdle and called folks of all kinds out to the River Jordan for a powerful baptism for the remission of sins. You won’t find him on any Christmas cards.

Advent confuses and confounds our expectations. It happens every year, and even when we know it’s coming, it still sounds strange to hear about stars falling from the heavens on the first Sunday of Advent.

But, my friends, we need this. We need Advent. We need to have our expectations challenged. We need to be reminded to “keep awake.” You see, Advent takes us in a very different direction to the manger. It forces us to encounter Christmas from a very a different angle.

If we follow the path set by our nation’s corporate marketers, we will journey down a road of shopping and consumption and will end this season with heartburn, maxed-out credit cards, and overdrawn checkbooks. We will miss Christmas and miss the child-king who waits for us in a barn, swaddled in bands of cloth and sleeping in feed trough for a crib.

My friends, Advent serves a wonderful purpose—it’s our own wandering little star. If we Magi follow it, we will find the Christ child. We will find worship; we will find hope, peace, and love. But if we ignore the wandering star of Advent, we will surely loose our way.

Keep alert; stay awake! This is the message of the first Sunday in Advent. Christ is coming; we do not know how or when he will arrive, but keep alert and stay awake.

The news of the coming of the Cosmic Christ is news that confounds our expectations and threatens to overthrow and subvert the structures of the world. The coming of the Cosmic Christ is the declaration that the powers and principalities of the earth will be turned topsy-turvy; that the first will be last and the last will be first.

The ascendancy of those who appear to reign of the cosmos will be torn down and the lowly and meek will be lifted up.

Until you understand this, you have not begun to understand Advent, and until you understand Advent, you cannot approach the manger.

Listen to the words of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as she reveals the true meaning of Advent:

“He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.

Advent is a season of expectation, of waiting, of keeping awake and staying alert. It is also a season of the unexpected, the unpredictable, and the surprising.

It is our own wandering star. Follow it each day.

Join the Advent conspiracy, and you will find him wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.