

Advent 3A
Advent Conspiracy—Worshipping Fully
Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
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When I was a child, I looked forward to Christmas, not only for the toys and treats, but also for the Christmas TV specials—*Mickey's Christmas Carol*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Emmet Otter's Jugband Christmas* from Jim Henson Studios, and the stop-motion *Rudolph* and *Frosty the Snowman* programs—you know, the “classics.” It was a Golden Age for kids' Christmas specials!

My favorite of all of them was *A Charlie Brown Christmas*—you know, the one with the Charlie Brown Christmas tree, the Peanuts gang dancing on stage to Vince Guaraldi's jazz score, and the famous soliloquy by Linus. Watching it again recently, I was overcome by a sense of nostalgia...childhood memories. But I was also struck by how well-written the story is. The plot is set up like a kind of parable. Charlie Brown is beset by a sense of malaise and melancholy because he senses that he's missing the meaning of Christmas. And so he has run-ins with characters who offer different answers to his dilemma, their ‘take’ on the meaning of Christmas. Charlie Brown's sister Sally comes to him asking for his help in writing Santa to share her Christmas wish list. After beginning what seems to be a long list, she suggests Santa should “make it easy on himself” and just send money, “Tens and Twenties,” which just disgusts Charlie Brown. The next character he runs into is his dog Snoopy, who is busy decorating his dog house. He's entered a neighborhood light-and-display competition, which makes Charlie Brown even more dismayed. So he seeks the advice of the local “psychiatrist” Lucy. After taking his 5¢ fee, she suggests that what he needs to do is that he needs to get more involved, to busy himself with something. For example, he could join the local Christmas play the kids are putting on. These three characters offer meanings of Christmas that we know well—Christmas is about presents, Christmas is about the spectacle, the pageantry, Christmas is about doing more, being more involved, being busy. These are temptations we face during the Christmas season too. But like Charlie Brown, we sense that there must be something else, that something's missing.

How many of you—as teenagers, young adults, or even older adults—have had the experience at the end of Christmas day, after all the presents have been opened and Christmas dinner has been eaten, how many of you have sat back and found yourself wondering, Is that *it*? Is that all? It's not that you didn't get that present you wanted. Rather, it's that all the energy and money that's been invested, all the fuss that's been made for the past month, and *this is it*? The whole business seems to have been in the end for nothing much after all. It's anti-climatic. Maybe you never thought too much about why, but you've felt it, felt let down. Call it post-Christmas depression, if you like. But it's more than just the after-effects of a good time, a holiday hangover. It's more the sense that you missed something. You've been waiting for the big payoff, but in the words of another Charlie Brown special, “the Great Pumpkin has passed you by.” It's like you've been waiting for something to come over here, but while you've been waiting, you missed something else going on over there. That's the problem with the Christmases celebrated by Sally, Snoopy, and Lucy—the presents, spectacle, and busyness—they are all diversions, distractions from the

real thing, the main event. They seem like they are the main thing, but they're not. And so when we focus our attention on them, we end up missing the true meaning of the holiday.

It's easy to get caught up in these distractions during the weeks leading up to Christmas. The culture says shop till you drop, the holiday parties say overindulge, and the Joneses next door challenge you (at least in your mind) to top their flashy Santa's sleigh display in the front yard. A few years ago the big thing was the Christmas light projectors, which casts colored lights on to your house from your front lawn. My dad told me that the neighbor across the street from him bought one. Not to be outdone, the neighbor next door put up five! Thus began the Christmas decoration war in my home neighborhood... Snoopy would be jealous.

As I said, it's easy to get sidetracked by the distractions and lose sight of the meaning of Christmas, to be confused by what we've made Christmas to be about. And it's not the fault of the Christmas Scrooges or retailers who wish customers "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas." I read in the news about a restaurant in St. Augustine, Florida, near where I grew up, where a customer left a note on the check, complaining about the Christmas music being played in the restaurant. It read: "Christmas music was offensive. Consider playing 'holiday' music or less religious themed." Reading the note, the Chef was shocked. "My server had to show me that, and it was really like, 'What is going on in this world?'" he told reporters. He then posted the note on his Facebook page — along with his five-word rebuttal: "Really?...what's wrong with people?" He explained his response, saying that for him, Christmas is "all about celebration of family, celebration of gathering with friends and people, and it's a tradition. It's not about a religion. It's not about anything else. I am a Christian, but I don't push that as my agenda. I think that Christmas is Christmas." Christmas is about "family, celebration of gathering with friends and people"? Really? Not about religion? Seems to me that the customer who was offended had a better grasp of the meaning of Christmas than this "Christian" chef. And I'd argue that his outright hostility is less damaging to Christmas than the chef's view of Christmas being just about gathering with family and friends.

The solution though is not to insist on putting "Christ back in Christmas," good intentions notwithstanding. It goes rather to what *we* do, how we Christians celebrate and observe Christmas. Do we follow what everyone else does, the Sallys and Snoopys and Lucys of the world, or do we do something different?

The past two Sundays I've been inviting you, challenging you to practice Christmas differently this year, to take part in the "Advent Conspiracy." We've talked about how we can do that, by Spending Less and Giving More. Now we've come to our last theme, Worshiping Fully. We could have just as easily started out the series as ended it with this theme—worship is the beginning and the end, the goal, of the Advent. It's at the heart of the season. For doing Christmas differently, more faithfully, is not just about changing the way we shop and give presents and who we give presents to. Underlying it all is a call to do something different, not just do what everyone else is doing differently. It's a call to focus not on the giving of presents or even being present to friends and family. It's a call to be focused on God, to draw near to Him, to worship, to worship fully.

What does that mean? When we think of worship, we usually think of coming to church, attending a worship service, like the one we are in the middle of right now. Yes, that's definitely part of it. But worship and worshipping fully is about more than that. It goes beyond the songs and sermon and sacraments.

I heard a rather provocative, even racy definition of worship recently: "Worship is making love to God." That may seem outrageous, but it's not out of step with the Bible. One of the words used in the Bible for worship is the word *proskyneo*. *Proskyneo* means at its root to come forward to kiss, to come close enough to kiss. The word conveys a sense of closeness, intimacy, of giving yourself to another person. You give the other person your full attention, your complete focus, showing them what they are worth to you. You see, worship is a matter of *worth*-ship, that's where we get our word worship—celebrating the *worth* of someone or something. To worship fully is to fully give yourself, your attention, to another, because they are worthy. That's how we are to love God with all your heart, your mind, and your soul. Not a half-hearted effort, but involves your whole self. You're full-on, you really show up. It's the opposite of distraction.

One of the signs of real worship is getting lost, losing yourself, losing track of time, forgetting everything else. Like when you are at a concert or a movie and you're so engrossed in the event, in the drama, that you lose yourself. You lose track of time, and your fears and hang-ups and preoccupations and anxieties are set aside, they melt away.

This is why *A Charlie Brown Christmas* is so spot on. After giving those three negative examples, the three chief distractions, counterfeit meanings of Christmas, Charlie Brown's friend Linus steps on stage, literally, to give an account of what Christmas is all about—he tells the story of the angels' appearance to the shepherds, announcing Christ's birth, from Luke's gospel. What he says is spot on. Christmas is about the birth of Jesus Christ. It's "the reason for the season."

But there's something more—something you probably didn't notice. You know how Linus carries around a security blanket, and is never without it. Well, in the scene where Linus tells the story of the first Christmas, he lets go of his blanket and it falls to the ground. It's a subtle action but it's significant. In that moment, Linus is at worship—focusing on God's action, lost in the Story, and his anxieties disappear.

It seems so ironic and so sad that this is the time of year that we should be rejoicing and celebrating the salvation that has been provided through God sending His Son into the world, but instead we are stressing out over what to give someone. In the weeks we have left before Christmas, I invite you to set aside your stress and anxieties and worries about getting everything done, and take time to worship, to pause, to stop the rushing around. Just take a minute to stand back and take it all in. Set aside some time to re-connect with God, to pray. Reflect on what Christmas means to you and what it means to God. Drink deeply of this time, this season, don't be distracted by the superficial aspects, confusing the externals for the essence, the true meaning. Advent is a time of expectation, of joy, of spending time with family and friends yes, but more importantly it's for spending time with God. It's a time of worshipping fully, of being fully engaged with, fully present to God. May you give God the gift of your presence, your attention, your love, and may you experience the gift of God's presence as well. Thanks be to God!