

Sermon Series: Advent Conspiracy

Worship Fully

Isaiah 11:1 – 10

Luke Edwards

Boone UMC

This morning we celebrate the first week of advent. The word advent, comes from the latin word *adventus*, meaning “coming.”¹ In the four weeks of advent we anticipate God taking on flesh, coming to this world a poor, homeless, refugee named Jesus.

Boone UMC has decided to look at advent through a recent Christian movement called the Advent Conspiracy. Over the next four weeks we will focus on the four tenets of advent conspiracy: worship fully, spend less, give more, love all. By focusing on these four things we hope to celebrate advent and worship this Christmas in a way that is more faithful.

It is no mistake that this movement begins with worship.

Hear this reading from the Prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 11:1-10)

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

²*The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; ⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. ⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.¹⁰ On that day the root of Jesse shall*

¹ <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/what-is-advent>

*stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him,
and his dwelling shall be glorious.*

Trouble in our Biblical Text

In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel is entrusted to bring about God's redemption to the world. Yet over and over again they fail in their mission.

The chapters of Isaiah leading up to this reading describe the various failures of Israel from the rejection of God's law, the disregard for justice for the oppressed, empty worship, and failed leadership.² The results of Israel's failures are judgment, destruction, chaos, and exile.

By the time of Jesus' birth, the people of God have returned to Israel from exile, followed by 400 years of silence. Now they are occupied and oppressed by Rome. They are conquered people under Roman control, facing brutal conditions and heavy taxation.³

Israel is broken, beaten up. The great tree of Israel is reduced to a stump of its former glory; the people are hurt, embarrassed and defeated.

Introducing Trouble in our World

As we enter advent this year, the pain of Israel is all too familiar to us. A spirit of divisiveness is increasingly apparent in our nation.

This week we witnessed an emboldened neo-nazi group emphatically extending their arms in anti-semitic gestures just miles away from the holocaust museum in Washington DC.

We saw an announcement that the KKK will host a victory parade here in our own state in the coming weeks.

We celebrated thanksgiving, a holiday with origins in a peaceful meal shared between pilgrims and Native Americans while we watched Native Americans protestors being doused by water cannons in sub-freezing temperatures in North Dakota.

We watched a Syrian boy, no older than 10, suffering from a chemical attack in Aleppo, plead with an aid worker, "Will I die miss? Will I die?"

² Interpreters, p39.

³ Perdue, Leo G., Coleman A. Baker, and Warren Carter. *Israel And Empire : A Postcolonial History Of Israel And Early Judaism*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*. Web. 22 Nov. 2016. **252**

We know what it feels like this week to long for redemption...to long for a savior...to yearn for peace.

Grace in the Biblical Text

In the midst of Israel's pain, comes a great promise of hope. A perfect king will come to usher in a perfect kingdom and establish peace on earth forever.

Our text describes this king as one whom the spirit rests upon. The king will not rely on human strength, but upon a supernatural capability.⁴

It is this supernatural capability that allows the king to attain practical wisdom to rule effectively, to attain the ability to perfectly exercise authority and it is this supernatural capability that allows the king to attain a discernment that flows from a reverence for God.⁵

This king will exercise his perfect power not for personal or national gain, but above all else to protect the weak and vulnerable.⁶

Jazz singer Gregory Porter, released a song earlier this year that describes the arrival of a king. He describes the community preparing for the king's arrival by gilding their homes with fancy decorations, lining the roads with shining splendor, but when the king arrives he says,

“Take me to the alley, Take me to the afflicted ones, Take me to the lonely ones that somehow lost their way”⁷

Clothed in righteousness the messiah will bring about justice for the poor and oppressed, striking down the wicked and oppressive. This is the King whom Israel waits for.

The Kingdom

Verse 6 of our text makes an abrupt shift from describing the king, to describing the results of his reign.

It's a kingdom of absolute peace, where the *“wolf shall live with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid.”*

Isaiah uses these extreme examples of fierce predators living in peaceful harmony with the most

⁴ Ostwalt, 279.

⁵ Seitz, 105

⁶ New Interpreters, 141.

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qj5z4SbrH20>

vulnerable creatures to paint a picture of the Messiah's reign. Theologian John Ostwalt describes the imagery this way, "the fears associated with insecurity, danger and evil will be removed, not only for the individual but for the world as well."⁸

Enemies will be rendered harmless; indeed the very label of enemies will be dissolved.

Trouble in our World

If we believe that the promised king has come in Jesus Christ why do we still have such great pain? Why do things not seem to be getting any better?

We thought that anti-semitism died with Hitler, but neo-nazi movements remain throughout the world. We thought that racism was taken care of in the civil rights movement, but our African American brothers and sisters still face vast systemic and explicit oppression. We thought that we had made amends with our Native American brothers and sisters, yet we see the No Dakota Pipeline protests occur. We thought the Iraq War was declared a victory, yet we see ISIS taking hold of the very same cities our soldiers fought to protect. What are we to do with this? Where is this king who was supposed to make it all better?

How do we get there?

In our text there was an abrupt shift from the descriptions of the coming messiah in v1-5, to the kingdom of absolute peace in v6-10. So how do we get from one to the other? A hint lies in v. 9. It says, "*They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*" When the earth comes to fully know God through Christ the king, then we will have absolute peace. We still experience the results of a broken world because so many in our world have not encountered the living God. Absolute peace comes when absolute worship comes.

Coming

There is no solution to the brokenness of this world without God coming to us. The promised king arrives on Christmas morning, God taking on flesh, ushering in the beginning of God's redemption of all creation.

God taking on flesh is only the beginning. Complete redemption will only occur when the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord. This is where we are invited in. According to Bishop Willimon, "Because God has incarnated, because the Trinity has thus made the world a stage on

⁸ Ostwalt, 283.

which is enacted the drama of our redemption, we are invited to join in God's redemptive work in the world, to tell the world the whole truth about God With Us."⁹

We are invited to become co-laborers in God's redemptive work. We are not able to do the work without God, and for some reason God chose to do the work through us.

Worship

Our partnership in God's redemptive work begins with worship. Worship simply means, ascribing worth. When we encounter the living God and recognize that God alone is worthy, we will be compelled to join in Christ's work of establishing peace. We cannot skip week one of the advent conspiracy that has us worship fully, and move straight to spending less, giving more, and loving others. Our good deeds fall flat if they do not flow from worship.

In Christian worship we ascribe worth alone to Christ, we receive the love and power of God and then we are compelled to an outward life of compassion and love.¹⁰ Worship is the precursor for redemptive action.

Baptismal Vows

This idea is further clarified in our baptismal vows. In which we were asked, "*Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?*" A friend calls these the batman vows because they're so intense you could find them in a superhero comic book. Note that we first *accept* the freedom and power to resist evil. Our ability to bring about peace is *received* from God in worship.

Yet, the language of resistance clarifies for all of us that the Christian life is not passive. We do not sit around waiting for peace to come about. Once we receive the power from God, we use it. We do not move towards the kingdom of peace by being passive any more than we can contain a wildfire by being passive. May God be with all of our NC firefighters this week. And may God grant us the same courage to fight the wildfires of hatred and evil in our world.

Inward and Slowly Outward

The transformative love of God begins with an inward transformation and slowly moves outward into the world. In worship, we set aside our earthly desires, recognizing that God alone is worthy of our affection. In this experience, our outward lives begin to change.

⁹ Willimon Incarnation

¹⁰ Mystic Evangelism, p.19

As our inward attitudes begin to more fully reflect divine love, we find ourselves living in beloved Christian community. There is nothing sweeter than deep, loving Christian community. A community of those who have encountered the living God is like a fresh fragrance to those who are a part of it and to the world around it.

The author Rita Snowden speaks of sitting outside a café in England as a local factory let off work. As the workers walked by her a sweet fragrance filled the air. She asked her waiter the source of the smell. He replied that they have just gotten off their shift at the perfume factory.¹¹

This is indeed the calling of the church, to be so fully in love with God, that our beloved community is a sweet smell to the world around us. As Elaine Heath says, “loving community is the greatest apologetic for the gospel.”¹²

But it does not end there. In advent, God puts on flesh and comes to us, forever changing the game of God’s redemption. Though our Christian community might fully reflect God’s love, we then must do as Christ has done and go into the chaos of the world transforming it with the good news of Christ. Christian community moves into the darkest corners of society finding ways to break through with a message of divine peace and love.

Rowan Williams puts it this way, “The gathering of baptized people is therefore not a convocation of those who are privileged, elite and separate, but of those who have accepted what it means to be in the heart of a needy, contaminated, messy world.”¹³

King Street Church has been able to bring our Christian community into the Hospitality House, the local homeless shelter and the local county jail; both places are immersed in the messiness of the world. Yet Christian community thrives in these places of chaos. I now have weeks where multiple felons tell me they love me.

One resident at the hospitality house told me this week that one of the ways in which he copes with his stress is whenever he is having a bad day, he gives 5 dollars to a homeless man that hangs around the hospitality house with severe, often crippling mental illness. Well one day last week my friend had a bad day, saw his friend, but had no money in his pocket to give him, the man with severe mental illness walked up to him handed him \$15 and walked away yelling profanities incoherently. My friend looked up to the sky and said, “You’re alright God.” God’s presence is clear in places of chaos.

¹¹ Campolo Let Me Tell You a Story, 2000. 164-165

¹² Heath, 13. Mystic way

¹³ Williams, Being Christian, 6.

The kingdom of absolute peace will come about when the church encounters and embraces divine peace and lives it out in the context of our broken world.

Boone UMC

This advent, what if this church was so transformed in our worship of the coming king that we were willing to go with God and with one another into our broken world? Something I have noticed in this church is that we are incredibly committed to our children and youth. We have one of the most impressive children and youth programs in the county, with our children's ministry and youth group busting at the seams. Our focus on children is apparent in all areas of our church including our worship. I've even heard people complain about how much time we devote to children in our worship services (I viewed this as a good sign)...but what about the children outside of our church?

Last April, I had the privilege of hearing a panel of 15 inmates at Butner Federal Prison talk about the church and mass incarceration. We asked the inmates what the church could do to help lower incarceration rates in our country. The gruff and tough looking men unanimously agreed, "Help the children. Get to us before we enter a life of crime." There are many studies supporting this instinctive answer from the inmates, connecting literacy levels and graduation rates with incarceration.

What if this church was so in love with Christ that we committed to joining in God's redemptive action among the children in our area? What if five of our families became foster parents? Grandfather Home for children told me this week that they have a child who has been ready to move out of the group home for some time, but cannot find a foster family.

What if twenty of us became lunch buddies with local elementary school students? A training is coming up on December 8th. Talk to Pastor Laura.

What if we had to call Hardin Park Elementary on Monday because we ran out of angel tree names because church folks were fighting over them after the service.

What if all of our children and youth embraced the "you can sit with us" mentality that our youth group has been teaching that shows their lonely peers at school that they have a friend to sit with in the cafeteria?

What if we raised \$3,000 for the Boy's night boys to go on spiritual retreats, a mission trip and a backpacking trip this coming summer. For those that do not know about Boys night, it's a welcoming and positive space that models a life of discipleship for teen boys in Bradford Trailer Park, it's led by JB Byrch, Pastor Laura's husband.

Conclusion

The kingdom of absolute peace begins with God taking on flesh. We join in this kingdom when we worship the living God, and in our communion with God we join in God's kingdom slowly permeating throughout our community and world.

In our movement towards the kingdom of peace let us remember the words of Martin Luther King Jr., "If you can't fly, run. If you can't run, walk. If you can't walk, crawl...but by all means keep moving." Amen.