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Get Ready!
Matthew 24:36-44, Romans 13:11-14

³⁶ “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son,^[h] but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴² Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day^[i] your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

In 2008, three pastors from different areas of the country, Rick McKinley, Chris Seay, and Greg Holder---- decided that they and their congregations had **‘missed’ too much of Advent and Christmas.**

They got to the end of December, like so many of us, And they felt **a need for something deeper, something more.** They felt like they had been sucked into a season of stress, consumerism, and hurriedness. They believed that all of that took away from the real meaning of Christmas—the birth of Jesus.

So they created a movement that has grown to incorporate pastors and churches all over the globe—the **Advent Conspiracy.** Conspiracy sounds like a strange name, but they chose it because it’s about Christians **‘conspiring’ to celebrate Christmas differently.** Not out of anger or guilt, but out of a desire to really find Jesus at Christmas.

They wrote a book called
Advent Conspiracy: Making Christmas Meaningful (Again),
 which was revised last year.

And in the book, they talk about how Christmas can still change the world,
 if we are willing to seek Jesus, and give of ourselves.

The whole movement is about ***truly celebrating Advent***,
 And preparing our hearts for the birth of Jesus,
 during the four weeks leading up to Christmas.

The Advent Conspiracy emphasizes four essential tenets:
Worship fully,
Spend less,
Give more, and
Love all.

All four of these actions
help move people away from a hustle, bustle, consumer-driven overspending,
 disappointing, stressful holiday,
 to a true celebration of Jesus' birth!
 Doesn't that sound great?

All of these actions also prepare us---
to be waiting and watching for Jesus.
 Not just at Christmastime, but all throughout the year!

When these three pastors and their churches adopted this Advent practice,
 they ***saved enough money*** to buy clean water for a village in West Africa,
 and ***they collectively felt like Christmas***
 had really happened in their hearts and churches!

Since 2008, the movement has spread and been adopted by
 Pastors and churches—not just in this country,
but all around the globe!
 Their book chronicles dozens of stories about changed lives and churches!

It really reminds me of our passages from Matthew 24 and Romans 13 today.
Because we live in this 'in-between' time—

Jesus has *already come*,
and he is *coming back* again some day.

And people have all kinds of reactions to this in-between time.
Some people are *afraid*,
believing they might be 'left behind',
as the famous book series so elaborately described.

Others take it to mean that we should *look for a Bible 'code'*
to figure out exactly when Jesus is coming back,
even though Jesus himself says throughout the Gospels—
that no one knows the day or hour of his return!

Some people *just don't care* about the return of Jesus—
Because life is all about us, and today.

Others care so much about the end times, and heaven,
That they are *willing to overlook the needs of today*,
or the needy all around us,
because we are just waiting for eternal life!

Well, what if all of these approaches are a little bit off?
We DO live in-between Jesus birth and Jesus' second coming.
But, what if that means that we are kind of ALWAYS
in an 'Advent' season,
not just at Christmas?

Advent means 'coming', 'longing', and 'yearning'.
Doesn't that describe our Christian life---all the time?
Aren't we always hoping and longing for Jesus?

At Christmas we are keenly aware of how much we need Jesus,
But what if we had this same awareness,
all year long?
We need Him at Christmas,
but we also need Him to come back, at any time, right?

Our Romans passage reminds us how to live in a waiting time,
Especially as we are getting ready for Jesus.

Paul writes: *For salvation is nearer to us now ...
the night is far gone, the day is near.*

***Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light;
13 let us live honorably ... and put on the Lord Jesus Christ...***

Let us put on the armor of light, and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Isn't that a beautiful image?

An image that is especially powerful in our worship here in this church,
Because the light of Christ is a central part of our service!

It's also a powerful image for ***Advent***,
As each week we light a candle
with a special meaning on our wreath.

In these acts of worship, ***we are putting on the light,***
And ***putting on the Lord Jesus Christ.***

Which goes right along with the ***Advent Conspiracy movement.***
Think about their first tenet---***to Worship Fully.***
All too often Christmas is so rushed and overwhelming,
that we actually neglect worship
because we are too busy, too tired, or too distracted!
Sometimes we are IN church, but not focused on worship!

Why is worship so important for Advent?

It's the key, because everyone who encountered the newborn Jesus
encountered him in worship!

Mary worshiped God in her prayerful Magnificat,
when she was told of his birth.

Elizabeth worshiped when she opened her home
to Mary and they shared stories of their miraculous pregnancies.

Joseph worshiped by believing the angel and taking Mary as his wife,
then bringing her to a humble stable for his birth.

Shepherds worshiped when the angels told them to go to Bethlehem,
and when they saw Jesus for themselves.

The Wise Men came with gifts—to worship the newborn King.

And still today—we encounter the baby Jesus in worship, each week in Advent, and throughout the week, whenever we choose to turn our hearts to Jesus, and remember the reason for this Christmas season!

The Advent Conspiracy Pastors pose a very serious ***question*** for all us:
Does the way we are spending our time, money and energy at Christmas, testify to our worship of Jesus?

This is so important--because our hearts are formed by what we worship!
Our time, money and talent tells us what we are really worshipping!

Rick McKinley, Chris Seay, and Greg Holder. Advent Conspiracy: Making Christmas Meaningful (Again), Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2009, 2018, Pg. 45.

One story in their book is about a family that decided to skip gifts, and instead spend a special night at a ***Christmas musical*** together. Then they went home to share about their love and blessings.

How can we choose to worship fully this Advent season?

The second tenet of the Advent Conspiracy is to ***Spend Less***.

This doesn't mean spend nothing,
It's about being thoughtful about what kind of spending is appropriate,
And how we can avoid indebtedness, stress,
And the temptation to be mere consumers at Christmas.

Think of how powerful that sounds.

We are so driven by a consumer culture-
where more is better, and we never seem to have enough 'stuff'!
Our media tells us there is always something better,
something more that we must 'have', that we 'deserve', that we 'need'.

The Advent Conspiracy pastors talk about how the ***fastest growing religion*** in the world is not Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism....

it's ***Consumerism***.

Rick McKinley, Chris Seay, and Greg Holder. Advent Conspiracy: Making Christmas Meaningful (Again), Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2009, 2018, Pg. 32.

Sadly, we DO try to serve God and money,
 despite Jesus' pleas for us to turn away from that idol,
 and the way it destroys lives.

Jesus actually spoke about money and possessions
 more than anything besides his preaching on the kingdom of God!
 He warned us time and again that life is not about what we have,
 It's about what we give.

***The truth is that the pursuit of money and possessions hurts us,
 and it so often hurts others.***

I was struck in the book by an interesting idea—
 what if every item of clothing we bought
 had a picture hanging on it
 of the person who made it,
 and their working conditions?
 Would we be so quick to buy a shirt made by a child?
 What about one made in a sweatshop?
 It's certainly something to consider, right?

They point out that the ***amount of money spent on Christmas gifts***
 in America is 45 times the amount needed
 to bring clean water to the whole world!
 Think about that!

*Rick McKinley, Chris Seay, and Greg Holder. Advent Conspiracy: Making Christmas Meaningful (Again),
 Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2009, 2018, Pg. 24.*

I'm overjoyed that ***our little church has heeded the call***
 to provide clean water for brothers and sisters in Malawi, Africa,
 but what if we used some Christmas money to continue reaching out?
 To support the Youth in Malawi?
 Or the Women's or Men's Guild?
 Or scholarships for Nursing students?
 The possibilities are endless.

The book describes another family
who gave each other gifts to a charity
*(like giving chicks or bees or goats through Heifer International or the
 Presbyterian Mission Agency like we do at Mothers and Fathers Day),*

and at Christmas instead of opening gifts,
they talked about why their donations were so meaningful.

Rick McKinley, Chris Seay, and Greg Holder. Advent Conspiracy: Making Christmas Meaningful (Again), Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2009, 2018, Pg. 33.

The third tenet of the Advent Conspiracy is to ***Give More***.
Which sounds a little odd after hearing we should Spend Less.
But Giving More means
giving more of ourselves—
of our time, our talent, our words, and our hearts.

How can we do that this Christmas?

I know that so many of you give of yourselves all the time in this church,
And in this community—
So how, can we continue that for Christmas?

One little way I am trying this is to ***sew handmade gifts***
as presents for our friends and family this year.
Which I hope is a symbol of giving from the heart.

And because of my Dad's increasing heart failure,
this Christmas I am giving my siblings
a book of interviews, pictures and video of Dad---
using a book called '***Conversations With Dad***'.
I'm asking him questions about his life and family,
and recording his answers.
I have a feeling that someday it will be very meaningful.

The fourth and final tenet of the Advent Conspiracy is ***to Love All***.
Loving All comes from ***Matthew 25***,
when Jesus says that by loving and serving the least of these,
we are actually serving Him.

How can we love the least of these this Christmas?

And do we realize that whenever we do this,
we find Jesus Himself?

This week I was reading a blog by Jonathan Merritt,
a Religion and Culture writer.

And he mentioned some articles about Mr. Rogers, which is timely, given the new movie that's out starring Tom Hanks. Have any of you seen it?

The title of this particular article is: ,

"Mister Rogers Wasn't Just Nice, He Wanted To Take Down Consumerism"

In this article D.L. Mayfield talks about

Stories from a biography of Fred Rogers, called *The Good Neighbor*.

I knew that Fred Rogers was ***a Presbyterian Pastor***, who didn't serve a church,

but he certainly served children everywhere through his children's program, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*,

and his dedication to his Christian faith and values.

What I didn't know is how strongly he believed in

the importance of children,

and the ***dangers of a consumer culture***.

He thought that the world taught children they need to *have more*, or *be more*, to be worthy of love.

He wanted to offer a different message to kids.

In his book, *The Good Neighbor*, by Maxwell King,

King tells an amazing story about Fred Rogers

being asked by the Hallmark flagship store

in midtown Manhattan, New York City,

to help decorate their window display for Christmas.

This was right at the height of his popularity in the mid 1970's.

Apparently, Hallmark would ask a different celebrity each year to help with their window display.

And all of the displays went over the top for Christmas,

Just as you might expect.

But Fred Rogers took a completely different approach!

He told Hallmark that he would design the window.

And he did.

In an unbelievably simple—almost 'Charlie Brown' way.

Fred Rogers asked them to put a **four-foot tall Norfolk Island pine tree**
 Right in the middle of the window (just the right size for a child).
 But no ornaments or decorations, just a simple green tree,
 planted in a clear glass pot, so people could see it's roots.
 And in front of the tree, he wanted a plaque that said simply:
"I like you just the way you are."

That was the whole window design. Nothing else.

And incredibly, Hallmark did it!

One of his friends remembers seeing that display,
 and being overwhelmed by it's meaning.

Mr. Rogers really wanted children to know
 that they ***didn't need anything else***
 to be worthy of love.

He wanted children to know that they are ***enough***.
 And being ***small is just as important as being big!***
I love that.

Some contemporaries of Fred considered him ***difficult*** to work with.

Not because of a bad attitude or a temper, or shoddy work.

No, it was because he was such a ***perfectionist***,
 and so ***far ahead*** of his time,

In understanding the needs of children.

He believed his work was about giving children what they needed,
 and making sure they didn't succumb to the harmful messages of our culture.

He was truly ***counter-cultural***,

And truly a voice for ***the least of these***—the children.

D.L. Mayfield, "*Mister Rogers Wasn't Just Nice, He Wanted To Take Down Consumerism*", The
 Washington Post, November 22, 2019.

***I wonder—what if we considered approaching Christmas
 in a similar way?***

By doing less, spending ***less***,
 and giving and loving ***more***?

What would that teach our ***kids***?

And what would it teach ***us***?

And what if were to embrace the Advent Conspiracy?

What if we committed ourselves to
Worship fully, Spend less, Give more, and Love all?

What if this was our ***road map to Christmas?***
For the birth of Jesus—
Into our hearts? Our homes? And our lives?

***And what if, it also helped us get ready to meet Jesus today,
And every day?***

Wherever, whenever we see Him---
As we worship each Sunday?
As we focus less on stuff,
And more on relationships?
As we seek to love everyone, especially the least of these?

***Does that sound like Good News to you?
It sure does to me!***

May we all seek to find Jesus, not only at Advent,
But ALL the time!
And for that, all of God's people say, Amen!