

Advent Conspiracy

Part 2 - Rebel

We're in week 2 of our Advent series we're calling Advent Conspiracy. And this year we're exploring 4 words, 4 idea's that have the potential to change the way we celebrate Christmas and we believe have the potential to change our world.

Pastor Frank started last week by looking at the first word: worship. Celebrating Advent, the coming of Christ, Immanuel, has to start with worship. He took us through a few of the characters in the Christmas narrative in scripture and helped us see how they worshipped.

I listened to Pastor Frank's message online this week and I appreciated everything he taught and had to say but the one thing I appreciated the most was something he didn't say. I so appreciated that he didn't confine or define worship to the music or teaching or the stuff that happens in this building on Sunday morning.

I think sometimes we get into this line of thinking that worship is what happens inside of the church for an hour a week. Pastor Frank helped us to see that our worship is a lifestyle. It's our response to the gift of Jesus, it's how we magnify Him, it's how we honor Him with our lives, everyday of our lives. Our worship doesn't stop when we leave this building. So I really appreciated that and if you missed last week, like I did, you can catch up by going online and listening to that.

Today we're going to take the next step in this conspiracy by talking about the second word. And I think we can all get worship. I think that's a pretty easy one for us to understand. But our word for today might be a little more difficult for some than it is for others.

Rather than setting it up with a story or some statistics I'm just going to plop it out there so we can start wrestling with it. If we're going to get fully into this Advent Conspiracy, if we're going to see Christmas change the world, not only are you going to have worship but you're also going to need to rebel. That's our second word.

It's not really a Christmas-y word is it? For some of you, you're not so sure you're comfortable with this word. For others of you, you're all too comfortable with it for all

the wrong reasons. But I want us to think about rebelling and I'm going to ask you guys to rebel with me this Christmas if you haven't already.

I want to make sure you understand me. I'm not asking you to go Ebenezer Scrooge on everybody this Christmas. He was a Christmas rebel but for all the wrong reasons. I'm not calling us into that kind of rebellion. We're not going to Occupy Advent. That's not the kind of rebellion I'm talking about.

I want us to go back to the text, the Christmas narrative in the Gospels and show you that it is a part of your tradition to rebel. In the original Christmas story, from Matthew and Luke, we find that rebelling is just a part of our story, our history, our tradition as followers of Jesus. I want us to look at that theme all throughout the narrative and reinforce it with some action steps.

So let's just jump right into this. We're going to look at *Luke 2* first. If you've grown up in church or ever seen *A Charlie Brown Christmas* you've heard this story before. We read it every year but I want to show you all of the hints of rebellion scattered throughout it.

Luke 2, ¹In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ²(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³And everyone went to their own town to register.

There's our first clue. Jesus was born in the days of Caesar Augustus. How is that a clue? We need to look at our history to help us with this.

During this point in history the Roman Empire stretched from India to England. It was huge. They had pretty much put everybody in the known world under their control.

Through a series of brutal, bloody civil wars in Rome, a man by the name of Octavius emerges as Caesar around 27 BC. He changes his name to Augustus which means "majesty" or "deity". He's a brilliant ruler and leader and brings about what we know of as the "Pax Romana", the Roman peace. He ends the wars, the bloodshed and the citizens of Rome love him for it.

He's adored and worshipped by his people. There are writings from this period that talk about him being the one who has been sent by the gods to bring peace on earth. Sound familiar? That started with Caesar Augustus.

And something else was going on at this point in history with the religious atmosphere in the Roman Empire. We talked about this last year but I want us to think about it again.

The Roman Empire had a state religion. It was called the "Religio" (Caesar is God). It found its roots in the worship of the mythical gods and goddesses of Rome that we learn about in school; Cupid, Neptune, Hercules, Diana, etc. The "religio" carried with it this belief that Caesar, whoever that was, was god.

The interesting thing is, when you read history, most Roman's didn't believe this anymore. They didn't believe Caesar was god but they participated in the "religio" because you don't mess with tradition, you don't mess with what works, you don't mess with what you've always done. So even if you don't believe in it, you participated.

Now, on an individual basis, you could worship whoever you wanted. If you had your own god or gods, you could worship them in the privacy of your own home. This was called "superstitio" (personal religion). Rome was very tolerant of personal religion. In the privacy of your own home do whatever you want but in the public square you participate in the "religio".

Here's where it gets interesting. The Caesar before Augustus was Julius Caesar and he declared himself as divine, as god. But Augustus, the Caesar in power when Jesus was born, wasn't comfortable taking on that title. He never declared himself as divine.

Instead, he pointed to his adoptive father Julius Caesar as god, which would make him... the son of God. He was ok with that title. He wasn't ok identifying himself as god but he was perfectly fine if people referred to him as the son of god.

So you see the "religio", the state religion, work itself out on Roman coins with statements like, "Salvation is to be found in none other than Augustus" or "There is no

other name given to men by which they can be saved.” These statements were stamped onto the Roman coins of that day. It was a part of the “religio”.

As you go through the 1st century you see each successive Ceasar do this and it’s on a collision course with another movement we’re familiar with. We’ve been studying that movement for the last 3 months. There’s a group of people who are worshipping this crucified Rabbi who they say has been resurrected. They start saying things like, he’s the son of God. He’s the one who has been sent to bring peace on earth.

Around 30 BC, the leader of this movement, a guy by the name of Peter, is on trial in Jerusalem. We looked at this just a few months ago. In *Acts 4:12* he says one of the most abrasive, rebellious, dangerous things he could have said at that point in history. He said, *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*

That verse is pretty controversial today, right? I mean, you throw that one out there in our culture and people start talking about how narrow-minded you are. But when Peter said this it wasn’t just controversial it was subversive and rebellious and political. Peter is essentially saying, “Just so we’re all clear about this, salvation can only be found in Jesus, not Caesar.”

Christians were killed for saying things like this in the Roman Empire. They were sent into the Coliseum to be torn apart by wild animals. They were covered in tar and used as human torches to light up Nero’s gardens at night.

Not because they believed that Jesus was God. Rome was full of so called “gods” and what you do in the privacy of your own home doesn’t matter. That’s your “superstitio”. But refusing to participate in the “religio”, saying things like “Caesar isn’t god”, got you into a load of trouble.

An author by the name of Francis Schaeffer says it like this, “Let us not forget why the Christians were killed. They were not killed because they worshipped Jesus... nobody cared who worshiped whom so long as the worshiper did not disrupt the unity of the state, centered in the formal worship of Caesar. The reason the Christians were killed was because they were rebels...they worshiped Jesus as God and they worshiped

the infinite-personal God only. The Caesars would not tolerate this worshiping of the one God only. It was counted as treason.” -Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?*

Maybe nobody’s ever told you this but if you’re a follower of Jesus, you come from a long line of rebels. It’s your heritage. It’s your tradition. And I’m calling you to get back to your roots this Christmas.

Let’s go back to *Luke 2* for some more clues of this rebellion. Everybody goes back to their own town to register because Caesar wants his taxes. *“So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.*

Bethlehem is our next clue. Jesus is born in the time of the Caesars, in Bethlehem. What do we know about Bethlehem?

Bethlehem is a little village just south of Jerusalem. It’s kind of a po-dunk, little town. It’s full of shepherds and farmers. It was the kind of town with one stoplight that constantly flashes red. NASCAR is really big in Bethlehem. Everything closes the first day of deer season. They had some high class people come from there, people like Ruth and King David but that’s been a thousand years. So Bethlehem didn’t have much going for it.

But for a little town that didn’t seem to have much going for it, it had everything going for it. See, there was this ancient Hebrew prophecy that talked about the importance of Bethlehem. This is *Micah 5:2, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.*

These words were written 700 years before Jesus and God was saying, through Micah, there is one coming, one who has been since the beginning of time, and he will be born in Bethlehem; a tiny, doesn’t even make it on the map, insignificant village in a remote corner of the Roman Empire.

Hold that thought and turn over to the gospel of Matthew. We’re going to look for some more clues to this rebellion there. *Matthew 2, “After Jesus was born in*

Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

There’s our next clue. There are two kings listed in the same sentence; two kings = two kingdom’s = two agenda’s = that never turns out well.

We’ve talked about one of those kings before. His name was Herod. History remembers him as Herod the Great but it depends on how you define “great”.

By most accounts Herod would be considered successful. He had a lot of money, built really big, beautiful buildings. But he’s at the end of his reign because he was a horrible, paranoid, tyrant.

He was never satisfied, always wanted more; more power, more praise, more adoration, more comfort. So much so that he executed people at the drop of a hat if they even remotely threatened his consumption of more. He had 10 wives, only loved one, but killed all of them because he was never satisfied.

Caesar Augustus would joke that he would rather be Herod’s pig than his son. Because Herod, as a non-practicing Jew, would never butcher a non-kosher pig but he had two of his sons executed. This was the “great” King Herod.

So these star-gazers, more than likely from Persia, modern day Iran or Iraq, show up in Jerusalem because they believed one of the stars they were studying was pointing them to the birth of a king. They wanted to know where he was.

They show up in Jerusalem, months, maybe even a couple years after Jesus is born, trying to find this newborn king. He obviously wasn’t born in the palace which explains *v. 3, When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.*

He’s disturbed and if Herod ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy. All of Jerusalem was disturbed with him. Herod calls in the chief priest and the teachers of the law and starts asking questions, “If this newborn king wasn’t born in my palace, where was he born?” And they tell him, “Well Micah tells us he will be born in Bethlehem.”

And Herod flies off the deep end and orders a wholesale manslaughter of every baby boy under the age of 2 in Bethlehem and the surrounding areas. This is how ruthless and power-hungry he is. There isn't enough room in Jerusalem for two kings, two kingdoms, two agenda's.

So let's review how all of this went down. Our rebel God slips into the story of mankind under the nose of a far-reaching empire, under the nose of a blood-thirsty, tyrant king, and Immanuel, God with us, little by little, year by year, heart by heart, story by story starts to turn history upside down.

It wasn't by force, it wasn't by threat, it wasn't with an army, God didn't kick in the front door like a SWAT team. He slipped into history and started what Phillip Yancey calls "a revolution of grace." His birth changed everything. Christmas changed everything.

I believe Christmas can still change everything. Just as the birth of Jesus changed the world then I believe His birth can still change the world today. Why do I believe that?

I'll start with a question. Is it possible that you and I live in an empire of little Caesar's, little wannabe gods promising to bring us peace? It is possible that we live in an empire full of tyrant kings that are always demanding more?

I think it's possible. They're not as obvious as they might have been in the 1st century but they're still with us. We have people and worldviews that are demanding our allegiance. We are inundated with messages telling us, "This is what will bring you peace. This is how you obtain happiness. This is the thing, the person, the process through which you can be saved."

I'm just going to state what I believe to be obvious. We're inundated, especially around this time of the year, with messages, advertisements, commercials on radio, TV, newspapers, online, that call to us, "If you really want your Christmas to be special you have to have this. This will bring you joy. This will bring you peace. This is the life-changing gift everybody needs. You're kids won't love you if you don't get this for them. Your wife won't love you unless you buy here a Lexus with a huge bow on top."

You know what I'm saying? Again, I'm not saying we should picket the mall or boycott Wal-Mart, I'm just saying let's call it what it is, it's a "religio". It's a religion of the masses. We'll fight and spray each other with mace for a \$2 waffle iron. We'll commit hours at a time, we'll even dedicate our bodies to standing in line, in the freezing cold to make sure we get that _____ (fill in the blank).

And here is where some of you start to write that e-mail to me and I understand but I'll save you the time. You're thinking, "Here we go. Here's where the preacher ruins Christmas. Ho-Ho-Ho-Humbug."

Please hear me, I'm not saying buying presents is bad, or wrong or sinful. I don't think that at all. I love giving gifts, I love getting gifts and I'm planning on doing both.

I'm not saying you shouldn't buy gifts, I'm simply asking you to wrestle with questions like how much is enough? How much is too much? Do we really think one more thing will satisfy us? I loved the quote Pastor Frank used last week, "You can never get enough of what you don't need to make you happy." -Eric Hoffer

I'm asking you to wrestle with questions like, what are we teaching our kids about the birth of Christ in our spending at Christmas? What are we teaching the next generation? Is over-consumption really going to help us worship Jesus?

They're not easy questions but I'm asking you to wrestle with them and inviting you into honest conversation about them.

I certainly don't have all the answers. I'm still trying to figure this out myself but one of the ways we can do that is by entering into this conversation together. Let's talk about this, let's pray about it, let's discuss these things, let's see what scripture has to say about it and then let's act.

Let me be specific. This is the second year we've participated in Advent Conspiracy and last year it was new to us and I just wanted us to take some baby steps so I asked you to spend less by buying one less gift. That was it. And if this is the first time you've ever heard this I think that's a pretty good place to start. Just buy one less gift and channel those resources somewhere else. We'll talk about that more in a second.

But for those of you who have already heard this, I want us to grow a little more in our rebellion. Maybe this year, it's two less gifts. Maybe it's cutting your Christmas budget by 15% or 25% or 50%.

Maybe this year it's giving some of your time away: time to serve a meal at the Rescue Mission or sometime freezing your toes off, ringing one of the bells for the Salvation Army. I don't know what it is for you and your family but let's grow in our rebellion this year.

Make it a family thing, sit down with your kids and have a conversation around what it looks like to rebel as a family at this time of the year. My son did this with his class at school. His teacher didn't even know she was teaching the class to rebel against the empire of more but she was. She was teaching them about the difference between needs and wants. She had them list out 3-4 things they needed and 3-4 things they wanted and then they talked about that.

At this time of year every 1st grader in America is thinking about what they want for Christmas. The messages of our culture are aimed at them just as much as they're aimed at us as adults. So these kids are thinking about what they really need and what they really want.

He came home that day and we were talking about it over dinner and you better believe I jumped all over that. It was a perfect opportunity to teach my kids, in an age-appropriate way, to think about rebelling against the empire of over-consumption. I didn't use that terminology but you understand.

I'm asking you to rebel. Even if it's only a small rebellion, a baby step, rebel against the empire of more, rebel against the Caesar of over-consumption.

And we're not going to rebel just to rebel. Some of you really like this idea because you're a rebel at heart and you're not going to conform and you're just all over it. I'm not interested in rebelling just because we have nothing better to do.

I want us to rebel and then think about channeling those extra resources to worthy causes. Again, we've tried to give you some examples of worthy causes, both

with your money and with your time, out on the wall in the lobby. You can also check out the Advent Conspiracy website if you'd like more idea's.

But I want to close by talking about how we're going to rebel as a church and where those resources are going to go this year. Again, if you were with us last year, you know how that all worked out and we had the biggest offering of the year and repaired multiple water wells in Haiti and gave to the Bridge here in Topeka and multiple families in our church. We'd like to do something similar to that this year.

So in two weeks, December 18th, we're going to take the offering that day and we're going to give it away. Unless you specifically write it on your check and tell us not to, we're going to take every penny that's given that day and give it to people who need it more than we do.

You've already heard me talk about how far behind we are with the budget and we're halfway through our fiscal year and it's a concern. I want to be honest about that. We're not panicked but it's a concern we have and we're watching it closely and being wise in our spending but I honestly still believe this is the right thing to do.

The experts wouldn't say we should do this with an end of the year offering. It's usually the end of the calendar year that a lot of churches can make up for any shortfall throughout the rest of the year and we understand all of that but I guess we just feel like we can't ask you guys to do something with your personal budget that we're not willing to do with the organization's budget. We're asking you to sacrifice and we've got to be willing to do the same.

So in two weeks we'll take the offering and again, unless you tell us otherwise we're giving it away. We've got three places we'd like it to go to this year.

The first place is an organization called Africa Water is Life. This is a branch of World Hope that digs clean water wells in Africa.

Just a few things to think about; Sub-Saharan Africa has 600 million residents. Of those 600 million, 300 million lack clean water. That would be like all of the United States lacking clean water. Of those 300 million, 3.5 million will die this year because of disease in the water they drink. The craziest part is that there is clean water, in

many cases, just below the surface that they have no way of getting to. They don't have the resources or equipment to get to it.

We do... so we're going to change the world for a community in Zambia this Christmas. One clean water well costs' \$5,100. We'd like to raise enough money for at least 1, hopefully 2. You can go to africawaterislife.com and look around at some of the ways clean water is impacting the people of Sub-Saharan Africa.

The second project we'd like to help with is somebody from our own congregation but it will affect many people that will never walk through our front doors. Randy Knight has recently joined the staff of Youth for Christ here in Topeka working with the incarcerated young men at the Kansas Juvenile Correctional Facility. Randy's got some amazing stories of what God has been doing through his ministry there already and he just started a little while ago.

As a staff member with Youth for Christ Randy has to raise all of his own support and we'd like to help him to do that. We have an opportunity to support Randy but beyond that we have an opportunity to help him take the gospel into the prison to those boys who need to hear and are receptive to it. So we'd like to be involved in that.

The third project we'd like to support is giving to some people in our own congregation this Christmas. We did this same thing last year and we were able to help multiple families during Christmas but it also helped families and individuals throughout the rest of the year with utilities, prescription medicine, we've been able to help pay for some professional counseling for individuals and married couples.

I actually got a call this week from somebody that really needs some extra help right now and it's so much fun to be able to tell them that we can help them as a church because of your giving from last Christmas and from the purchase of the Go Serve gift cards each week. It's been such a blessing to be able to do that with people we know and love and we'd like to do it again this year.

So that's a snapshot of what we'd like to see happen. That's what we believe our collective rebellion is going to help accomplish this Christmas and it really does have to

start with all of us. It's great if I think this is a good idea and we should give all this money away but until you and I think it's a good idea not much is going to happen.

Let's rebel. Against the empire of more, against the Caesar of over-consumption, let's join the revolution of grace and channel our collective rebellion to bless others this Christmas.