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Full Bellies, Empty Hearts and the Advent Conspiracy – 11.29.9

Here's an interesting passage from **Haggai 1:5-11**

⁵ Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. ⁶ You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."

⁷ This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. ⁸ Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD. ⁹ "You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. ¹⁰ Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. ¹¹ I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands."

We've been talking about how our neglect of the Lord and his priorities causes us to miss out on still waters, on rest and refreshment from our Shepherd, on abundant life. This passage from **Haggai** illustrates our problem.

Our situation isn't the same as the one into which **Haggai** was written. In **Haggai**, the Israelites were returning to their own land after generations in captivity. God had opened the heart of a king and given his prophet a vision of returning to Israel and rebuilding Jerusalem and restoring the temple from the rubble. But that work was languishing. They were more concerned with their own homes and pursuits than with rebuilding the house of the one who brought them back, and they were paying a price and wondering why.

The details of our lives are different. We're not commanded by God to build anything. His home in these days of the Holy Spirit, is within each one who belongs to him. I can't really stand up here and say, "How dare you keep your home so nice and fail to help mow the church yard!"

But look at the parallels with what we have been talking about. We eat, and yet we are never satisfied, even though there is plenty of food. We buy, but we never have enough. We work, but it doesn't pay off like it should. We try to put money away, but it's as if we're stuffing it into a purse with holes in it. We expected much, but see, it turned out to be little.

What I'm describing is true individually and it's true on a national and even a global scale. We got everything we ever wanted and found that it wasn't enough. Our lives illustrate how miserable people can be in a most comfortable situation. Anyone who grew up on church has been inspired and admonished by the lives of saints and martyrs who illustrate how content someone can be in a miserable situation – like Paul in prison saying in **Philippians** that he has learned the secret to being content in every situation, whether well-fed or hungry. Americans are just the opposite – we're miserable in comfort. We have turned our lives over to other shepherds like money or popularity or pleasure, and it isn't satisfying. We have full bellies and empty hearts.

Why is that? It isn't because we've neglected to build God's temple, but because we've neglected to follow him as the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. We have chosen to follow a shepherd whose intent is to steal or kill or destroy rather than the one who came to give us life, and abundant life at that.

Now to make matters worse – what if we took some of our worst tendencies in this direction – the tendency to chase after shiny things, the tendency to overspend and impress people with material things, the tendency to jam pack our lives so full that we don't have time for the people we love, the tendency to eat and drink too much and wreck our health as we try to feel better about life...and we rolled them all together into one month-long celebration and said, "We're going to do all of this to celebrate the birthday of our one true Shepherd, Jesus Christ!"?

That's what this video is all about: **Show Advent Conspiracy video.**

We watched that video last year about four days before Christmas, and at that late date, there were a lot of guys saying, "Yeah, I'll buy her one less gift...what a relief!" This year I wanted to get it in a lot earlier so you could make some legitimate plans together, plans to celebrate the Shepherd by giving of your self, your gifts, your presence, your time and your love.

The video is by a group called Advent Conspiracy (adventconspiracy.org). The folks at AC introduce themselves by saying: "Advent Conspiracy is an international movement restoring the scandal of Christmas by substituting compassion for consumption." They propose a new way to celebrate Christmas and Advent (which is the traditional time of preparation leading up to Christmas). The part of the video that hit me hardest was where they talked about the whole flurry of activity leading up to Christmas, running to the malls, fighting traffic, buying gifts...and then in a breath, the mood changes when we run off to church and squeeze that in as an afterthought. That reflects too closely my own practice, and I need a new way to celebrate Christmas as much as anyone.

I'll take my four points from Advent Conspiracy today as we close out this series on Still Waters and transition into Advent and Christmas. These four points aren't just for Christmas, but they reflect the heart of the Good Shepherd as we follow him every day of the year. If our bellies are full and our hearts empty, if we live on the run and are becoming strangers to the people we love the most, if we're knocking ourselves out to achieve the American dream and losing the people we're supposed to share it with...this can help.

To restore Christmas and life itself to its rightful place and meaning...

Worship Fully - At the Advent Conspiracy web site, it says: *"It starts with Jesus. It ends with Jesus. This is the holistic approach God had in mind for Christmas. It's a season where we are called to put down our burdens and lift a song up to our God. It's a season where love wins, peace reigns, and a king is celebrated with each breath. It's the party of the year. Entering the story of advent means entering this season with an overwhelming passion to worship Jesus to the fullest."*

Did you ever notice how much worship was the primary activity of nearly everyone involved in the Christmas story? The Magi came asking: **"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" (Matthew 2:2)**. And then when they found him, it says: **On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him (v. 11)**. When the angels appeared to the shepherds who were out in the fields keeping watch over their flock, they worshipped. It says: **Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:13-14)**. Then the shepherds went and saw the newborn king, and it says that they

returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told (v. 20).

Then when Jesus was presented at the temple, an old man named Simeon, a man who had been waiting and looking forward to the coming Messiah, came and took Jesus in his arms and worshipped, saying:

²⁹ **"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you now dismiss your servant in peace.**

³⁰ **For my eyes have seen your salvation,**

³¹ **which you have prepared in the sight of all people,**

³² **a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2:29-32).**

The only reason to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ is to praise God for sending us our salvation. If worship isn't really going to play any part in Christmas, or if it's just going to be an afterthought, why NOT just say "Happy Holidays" or "Season's Greetings"?

Now we have always worshipped in church at Christmas. Or, more accurately, we have always had worship services here at Christmastime, and I happen to think that they're pretty good and they make it possible for me and you to join in and worship the newborn King. That doesn't mean that we all worship when we come in here, because we may come with a variety of distractions and other agendas that occupy us (much to our own loss). But the opportunity is here.

What I'm suggesting is that, to take the next step, we need to make worship more a part of our family celebrations. I'm talking about singing Christmas hymns together. If music isn't your thing, I'm talking about reading the Christmas story together – not "Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house..." but **"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night" (Luke 2:8)**. I mean praying together and counting your blessings together and thanking God for them. Fathers, you need to take the lead to make this happen. God's job for you is to be the spiritual leader in your home. But if there is no dad at home, or he just isn't going to do this, anyone can say: "Why don't we read the Christmas story together?" and make it happen. To recapture the meaning and proper place of Christmas, make sure you worship fully.

Spend Less - Here's how the folks at Advent Conspiracy explain this: *"Before you think we're getting all Scrooge on you, let us explain what we mean. We like gifts. Our kids really like gifts. But consider this: America spends an average of \$450 billion a year every Christmas. How often have you spent money on Christmas presents for no other reason than obligation? How many times have you received a gift out of that same obligation? Thanks, but no thanks, right? We're asking people to consider buying ONE LESS GIFT this Christmas. Just one. Sounds insignificant, yet many who have taken this small sacrifice have experienced something nothing less than a miracle: They have been more available to celebrate Christ during the advent season."*

One less gift isn't all that radical or all that hard. But it's a start.

Think for just a second about all the things Jesus said about money:

From **Matthew 6** – ¹⁹ **"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also..."**

²⁴ **"No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."**

How will I honor the teacher who said that? Why not buy my wife a thousand-dollar diamond bracelet?

From **Luke 12** – ³² **"Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.**

How will I honor the teacher who said that? Nothing says "Happy Birthday Jesus" better than a 58" plasma TV!

From **Matthew 25** – ³⁵ **For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'**

How do I honor that teacher? Two weeks in Hawaii sounds about right!

Given the life that Jesus lived and the things he taught us about money, it's strange that we ever came to celebrate his birth by spending hundreds or thousands on expensive gifts. It's like remembering Gandhi by going to McDonalds!

The only Biblical justification for it that I can think of is that the Wise Men brought Jesus gifts – expensive gifts of gold, and myrrh and frankincense. That set a precedent, right? But they brought the gifts to Jesus, not for each other. That's the point. Jesus made it clear that the way to give him gifts was to serve the most needy among us. **I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me (Matthew 25:40).**

I can't vouch for the \$10 billion figure that they say will give everyone clean water, but \$10 billion, which apparently is about 2% of what we spend on Christmas presents, could help a lot of people in his name.

So, to restore Christmas to its rightful place, worship fully, spend less, and...

Give More - This is where you might expect to talk about giving to the poor, but that's actually the flip side of spending less, and it's also a corollary to the fourth point. Under "Give More", the Advent Conspiracy people talk about giving PRESENCE more than PRESENTS: *"God's gift to us was a relationship built on love. So it's no wonder why we're drawn to the idea that Christmas should be a time to love our friends and family in the most memorable ways possible. Time is the real gift Christmas offers us, and no matter how hard we look, it can't be found at the mall. Time to make a gift that turns into the next family heirloom. Time to write mom a letter. Time to take the kids sledding. Time to bake really good cookies and sing really bad Christmas carols. Time to make love visible through relational giving. Sounds a lot better than getting a sweater two sizes too big, right?"*

When you think about it, TIME was what Jesus gave his disciples – three years of living with them, teaching them, loving them, forgiving them, investing in them. It's a lot better than him saying: "Here, read my book, listen to my CD series, and learn to be like me".

This year, think about how you can honor Christ and his ways by giving MORE...of your time, and of your talents and gifts...to your loved ones. Maybe there is something you can make for your wife or your sister that would really be a treasure. Maybe it's just time together with a daughter or son, a night out each week, or a fishing trip, or lunch together more often.

Celebrate Christmas by giving more of such things.

So: To restore Christmas to its proper place and meaning, worship fully, spend less, give more, and of course...

Love All - Of course I'm talking about love in action, which is why it's symbolized by the water bottle – one of the greatest acts of love is to provide clean water, to drill wells in towns where waterborne disease kills many. Once again, from Advent Conspiracy: *“When Jesus loved, He loved in ways never imagined. Though rich, he became poor to love the poor, the forgotten, the overlooked and the sick. He played to the margins. By spending less at Christmas we have the opportunity to join Him in giving resources to those who need help the most. When Advent Conspiracy first began four churches challenged this simple concept to its congregations. The result raised more than a half million dollars to aid those in need. One less gift. One unbelievable present in the name of Christ.”*

This is where the AC people have a vision to make Christmas giving a church-wide event, or even a time for a bunch of area churches to give together to do something significant. Let's face it, we've heard sermons all our lives about how Jesus should get the gifts on his birthday and how we shouldn't be so materialistic. Well the Advent Conspiracy folks want to do something about it by making Advent and Christmas the time of the year where churches GIVE to improve lives around the world and in their own communities.

Again, remember that Jesus said: **I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me (Matthew 25:40)**. So if we want to give him a gift for his birthday, he just told us how to do it. By feeding the hungry; securing clean water for the thirsty; clothing the naked; housing the homeless.

Every year, MHCC people give generously to the Angel Tree, a ministry T organizes to make sure poor families have a few needed gifts for their kids, and you (as always) have given generously to that. What if Christmas became known across America as the time where Christians and their churches gave sacrificially to relieve suffering in the name of Jesus?

That's a big challenge. Why not start small? You certainly know of someone personally who is in need. Someone in your Sunday School class. A neighbor. Someone at school or work. The need might be money, or childcare, or help fixing a car or repairing a roof. Why don't you meet that need, or at least contribute to it the best way you can? Perhaps you can give a secret gift or do a secret act of service. Or maybe you can get a couple of people together and do it as a project. You know needs. So why not give of your time and meet them this week, and show the love of Christ, as a Christmas present TO Christ?

Worship fully. Spend less. Give more. Love all. That's the Advent Conspiracy, and it's recession-proof.

And it's a good way to get off the speeding treadmill, drop out of the rat race, and get back into the care of the Good Shepherd who wants us to know the green pastures and still waters he provides. It's crazy and even a little satanic that the birthday of Christ pulls us away from the Shepherd. But it doesn't have to. It's our choice.

So let's finish the way we began the series: With **Psalm 23**, as a pledge...

Psalm 23 - A Psalm of David. (NKJV)

1 The LORD is my shepherd;

I shall not want.

2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures;

He leads me beside the still waters.

3 He restores my soul;

He leads me in the paths of righteousness

For His name's sake.

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil;
For You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup runs over.
⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD
Forever.