

Advent is a time of new beginnings. We have changed from lectionary year B, the year of Matthew, to year C, the year of Luke. So we will be hearing a slightly different perspective on familiar things than we have heard for the past two years.

We have changed from the green of ordinary time to the clean bright White of Christ the King last week to the midnight Blue of Advent, our night of waking, watching, hoping, longing for peace, for justice, for love, for all things to be set right in God's Kingdom of Shalom.

Advent is a uniquely beautiful season, like a clear and starlit night.

This year we are focusing again, but more directly, on the insights of the Advent Conspiracy as a vehicle to organize our Advent thinking and worship. Last year we called attention to this movement among the churches of many denominations to reclaim this sacred time of preparation for the coming of Christ. Again, I invite you to visit their website <http://www.adventconspiracy.org/> and to take to heart their fourfold slogan (very appropriate to the four Sundays of Advent): Worship fully; spend less; give more; love all. We have woven them into the opening rite for the season as we light the Advent Wreath at each service, and into the seasonal blessing. In our Adult Study we are considering them week by week with videos from the pastors who originated the movement.

Clearly these four ideas form a cohesive whole, but they can also be considered separately. So today I want to concentrate on the first, "Worship fully."

What does this mean – to worship fully? We could be rather superficial and simply remind ourselves to come to church each week of Advent, to light our advent wreaths at home, perhaps to say an Advent grace with meals, to be faithful with our daily devotions. Those are all worthy goals. But surely there is more.

Worship fully, not half-heartedly. Worship fully, not occasionally. Worship fully, not superficially.

There are some clues to what this might mean in today's readings:

The Psalm begins, "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul." Lifting our true selves up to God, offering our innermost being to the one who made us – that is worship and if done whole-heartedly it could be worshipping fully.

The Epistle writer asks, "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?" How can we thank God enough? Is our gratitude ever sufficient?

This is Thanksgiving weekend and our tradition teaches us that giving thanks is the heart of worship, that blessing is accomplished by giving thanks to God for something – and so our central act of worship is the Eucharist, the Great Thanksgiving for all God has given and is giving us. Gratitude provides the most direct connection between our hearts and God's.

So one way to move toward worshipping fully is to concentrate on gratitude, on living in an attitude of perpetual Thanksgiving. It is a lovely way to live which is guaranteed to ease stress and improve relationships on all levels.

As I thought about worshipping and what might be a model of complete, unrestrained worship, my mind leapt ahead past Advent, even past Christmas, to Epiphany, to the Magi. Last week Deacon Mimi alluded to the shepherds on the hillside, hearing the angels' song and going to worship the newborn Christ Child. The Shepherds and the Magi have been images of whole-hearted worship for two millennia.

So what are the aspects of the story of the Magi that might expand and enhance our ideas of worship?

First, they looked intently at the world around them, they studied both the traditions passed down by wise predecessors and the world as they could see it for themselves, they learned everything they could about the world and about God, and they shared their knowledge and experience with other seekers. An important aspect of this part of their journey toward full worship was quiet, patient watching and waiting.

Then, when they saw the sign they were seeking, they left everything behind, traveling across the desert, away from everything familiar, following the voice of God, the Guiding Star to find their own encounter with Immanuel, God come among us, offering himself to us for worship, for relationship.

And they brought their best gifts – Gold, frankincense, and myrrh: valuable, rare commodities for which they had to give up a lot. Gifts that showed the seriousness of the joy and devotion.

Then they went back to the familiar round, went back transformed, bringing back hearts made new by their encounter with the divine.

The Magi are excellent examples of fullness of worship. They brought the best of themselves, of their whole selves to their quest and their worship. In Jesus' Summary of the Law, said each Sunday at the beginning of our 8:00 worship, we are encouraged to love the Lord our God with our whole selves (heart, soul, mind, and strength). To worship God is to offer our gifts to God, appropriately our whole selves, the best we have to offer.

When I reached this point, of offering our gifts, I recalled the lovely poem by Christina Rossetti which we have in our hymnal at #112 (In the bleak midwinter), especially the last two stanzas:

Angels and archangels may have gathered there
Cherubim and seraphim, thronged the air;
But his mother only, in her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the beloved with a kiss.

What can I give him, poor as I am,
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wiseman, I would do my part,
What can I give him, give my heart.

“Give my heart.” To us that may seem a poor small gift, but not to God. I have used the expression “whole-hearted” throughout this sermon intentionally. That is fullness of worship, to give our whole hearts to God.

Worshipping fully with one’s whole heart, one’s whole self will not be the same for each person, because we are of course all unique. Looking back to those various elements of the Magi’s journey we find many avenues for many types of people.

Some may focus on study – and this too can be extremely varied. One may delve deeply into our Advent booklet. Another may decide to carefully read Luke’s Gospel, as we begin this new church year. Another may read, or reread, *The Shack* in preparation for our shared exploration in January. Some may study the insights of contemporary physics and what they have to tell us about God and our world. The possibilities are numerous.

Some may focus on quiet reflection, taking time with prayer or cats or the fire or music – or any combination of those, watching, waiting, listening for the coming of God.

Some may focus on doing – getting on their metaphorical camels and going the distance to serve, helping Good Sam with the Christmas baskets, making dinner at the Good Neighbor Center, any feeding, giving, serving; like the Magi leaving the familiar behind to discover what God has for our hands to do.

Some may focus on offering specific gifts they have to give: singing in the choir or caroling in hospitals, cooking Saint Nicholas cookies, quilting for people in need, knitting prayer shawls or sweaters for cold children, renewed friendship with old friends, hosting parties or dinners to bring joy and fellowship into others’ lives, visits to isolated people or to neighbors, writing stories, poetry, letters.

There are so many gifts among us, all of great value, like Gold and Frankincense and Myrrh – and we want to offer them all to God, wholeheartedly – so that they can form our full and appropriate worship.

And we know that, like the Magi, when we have made this journey, to offer our whole selves, we will return to our ordinary lives transformed, with hearts and minds made new. The Advent Conspiracy talks about changing the world. The world is changed because we are changed, transformed by our fullness of worship into worthy companions of the Shepherds and Magi, who bring gifts to the Christ, and bring Christ to the world.