



Worship Fully — Escape the Noise

Isaiah 58

Sermon Outline based on a sermon by Jim Martin, IJM Vice President of Spiritual Formation.

This sermon is one in a four-part series encouraging congregations as they join the [Advent Conspiracy](#) and Give More, Spend Less, Worship Fully and Love All.

1. Introduction to Advent Conspiracy

- The holiday season often brings on two competing emotions: Quiet anticipation, and escalating stress.
- This seems to be true both for people of faith and for people of no faith. In a strange way, we can easily wind up in the same boat. The season seems to catch us in its vortex, whirl us about and spit us out into the New Year with the equivalent of a holiday hangover.
- **But what if this year were different?** What if there were a way to approach the season that would maximize anticipation and reflection and minimize stress and anxiety?
- This season, along with thousands of churches around the world, we've entered into something called the Advent Conspiracy. As a church, we're going to live out our belief that Christmas can still change the world—and that it can still change us!
- Together, this season we will be journeying together through four simple commitments. We will explore these themes over the next four weeks of Christmas.
 - **Worship Fully.** It starts with Jesus. It ends with Jesus. Advent is a season where love wins, peace reigns and a King is celebrated with each breath. Entering the story of Advent means entering this season with an overwhelming passion to worship Jesus to the fullest.
 - **Spend Less.** This doesn't mean that we won't spend *anything* at Christmas – just consider buying *one less gift* this Christmas. We all might remember our favorite gift from last Christmas, but do you remember your third or fourth gift? I didn't think so.
 - **Give More** – more of your time, your energy, and your presence. We'll be people who give more relationally to those we love – so take your kids sledding, spend some time with your mom watching old holiday movies, or make a gift that turns into the next family heirloom.
 - **Love All.** When Jesus loved, he loved in ways never before imagined. Though rich, he became poor to love the forgotten, the sick, and the oppressed. He reached out to the margins. By spending less at Christmas, we have the opportunity to join him in giving resources to those who need it 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.
- Four commitments: Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More and Love All. Simple, but not easy. So we'll take them one week at a time. We'll lay out a clear, biblical foundation and offer lots of practical steps your family can take to join the Conspiracy this season. This week, we explore what it means to **Worship Fully** in the Advent season.

2. Re-centering amidst the Noise

- As a nation, we will spend an estimated \$450 billion on Christmas this year. That's a lot of dollars. In fact, if we stacked up all those dollar bills, then tipped that huge stack over on its side, it would stretch across this room, out the door and across the city—and then around the circumference of the world and back to this sanctuary. And there'd still be a stack 10,000 miles high left over¹.
 - Some of this money we spend at Christmas is invested in great, worthy things: special meals, thoughtful gifts and travel that reunites families.
 - But much of it will be spent on gifts that no one really needs: another sweater, another toy, another tie.
- We find ourselves amidst a cultural “noise” that starts out right around Thanksgiving. From decorations to songs to advertisements to holiday parties—it's everywhere, all the time and it's deafening. This noise can make any worship at all quite difficult—never mind *Worshiping Fully*.
- Worship is about honoring God with our whole lives to acknowledge **who God is, what God has done, and what God continues to do**.
- So the fact that it can be especially difficult for some of us during the Advent season is quite ironic indeed. The “noise” can get so loud that drowns out all the other voices—like that of the prophet Isaiah. *Read **Isaiah 9:6-7***.
- Our goal this year is to make sure this all-important voice is not drowned out during the season. We must stay grounded in the beautiful reality of Christmas: a child has been born for us, a son given to us. The Advent of God *with* us changed everything. It changed the history of the world, and it changes us.
- If we are to Worship Fully this season, there are two questions we'll need to consider. In the midst of all this cultural noise:
 - How do we quiet ourselves to hear the still, small voice?
 - How can we be sure in, in the midst of it all, that God hears us?

3. A Disconnect

- Isaiah addresses these questions several chapters later. Like us, the Israelites were sometimes good at worshipping fully and sometimes not so good. By Isaiah 58, they are in a bit of a rough patch—God is angry with the people, and they, in turn, are angry with God. *Read **Isaiah 58:1-4***²
 - *Verse 3* – The Israelites seem to be working hard at their worship. Day after day they seek God, but to no avail.
 - *Verse 4* – Something about their worship is not pleasing to God. He is displeased enough with the lives they are living, that he will not listen.
 - God is not upset about what's going in *inside* the sanctuary. God is upset about what is going on *outside*. *Worshiping Fully* is not just about our posture *inside* the sanctuary. It has just as much to do with how we live on the outside. It's all connected.

4. True Worship

- God makes this abundantly clear in his answer to the Israelites' complaint. *Read **Isaiah 58:6-7***
 - These commands are all very personal: not, “see that these people get help,” but “*you* help these people.”
 - These commands are all about using what we have to serve those who are powerless—victims of violence, oppression and hunger.
- Worshipping fully is just as much about how we live *before and after* we head to the sanctuary as it is about how we engage while we're there.
- The Israelites should have known. They had the Psalms to remind them. *Read **Psalms 10:17-18***.
- God *hears* the cries of the oppressed. God *listens* to the suffering of the vulnerable. If our lives are party to oppression when we head off to worship at the sanctuary, then it's unlikely that God – who

¹ Total height of stack of \$450b dollar bills ~35,000 miles.

² See chapter 5 of Jim Martin's *the Just Church* for a more thorough reflection on this passage

hears the desires of the meek, the orphan and the oppressed – will incline his ear to us when we cry out.

- Even earlier, in Chapter 1, Isaiah calls God’s people to responsibility with respect to the powerless. **Read *Isaiah 1:17*.**
 - Justice matters to God and it must matter to us. Worshipping fully requires that we seek justice and rescue the oppressed.
- God promises if we will actually live this way, we will be blessed. **Read *Isaiah 58:8-9*.**
 - In so many ways, this is just what we hope for when we launch ourselves into full worship: a clear sense of the presence of God. Whenever we cry out for help, God will respond, “Here I am.”
 - Is it really that simple? We seek justice for the oppressed, and every time we show up in the sanctuary, we experience the profound presence of God? *Let me offer an answer to that question with a story.*

5. Modern Day Injustice

- One of the ministries we’ll be talking about over the next four weeks is International Justice Mission, or IJM. IJM is a human rights agency that protects the poor from violence. In nearly 20 field offices around the world, IJM investigators, lawyers, and aftercare professionals work closely with local governments to bring rescue to victims of slavery, sex trafficking, police abuse and other forms of violent oppression. And they do this work in response to God’s call to justice in the Bible.
- I want to share one story with you from a book by IJM’s Bethany Hoang, titled *Deepening the Soul For Justice*.³

Michael serves as night guard for a prominent Nairobi resident and U.N. Security Officer. One night, while Michael was on duty, armed thugs stormed into the property, and shot and killed Michael’s employer. After the perpetrators fled, Michael assisted his employer’s family in reporting the horrible events to the police. Michael let the police know the thugs had taken his phone in the course of the attempted robbery.

Upon returning to work a few days later, Michael found his phone discarded in the bushes on the property. Thinking nothing of it, Michael gave the phone to his son, Joshua, whom he thought might be able to fix it. In the course of their investigation of the robbery and murder, the police traced Michael’s phone—recorded as stolen property—back to him and his son. Michael and his son Joshua explained that they had recovered the phone after finding it discarded on the property. But it didn’t matter, the police arrested them, claiming that their possession of Michael’s own phone proved their guilt—not only in only stealing the phone but robbing the home and committing the murder.

IJM became aware of Michael’s imprisonment early in 2010 and took on his case. IJM attorneys pushed the case through trial, confident that it would result in freedom. There was literally no case at all against Michael and Joshua – the only bogus evidence at all connected being Michael’s own cell phone.

Eleven months after Michael and Joshua’s arrest, the court announced its verdict. In a stunning and confusing judgment, the court set Joshua free, but convicted Michael of Robbery with Violence – a charge that carries the death penalty. “This is so-called ‘result-oriented justice,’” explained the IJM Kenya Field Office Director. “Someone – didn’t matter who – had to pay for the crime. It was Michael.”

Michael was given a life sentence. Without a shred of evidence against him, the 78-year-old man continued to languish in jail.

- What our friends at IJM tell us is that, tragically, Michael’s story is far from unique. In the developing world, countless mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers are held in prison on false charges – and, in some cases, without charges at all! So as we all got ready and headed off to the

³ Available on Amazon.com and other book retailers

sanctuary this morning, we did so as countless of men and women just like Michael were not heading off to church, but languishing in prison.

Perhaps few people can teach us the nature of true worship more profoundly than Michael. In prison for a crime he did not commit, this is what Michael remembers: “God knew me inside out. I knew he saw me. I told him: ‘The police won’t listen to me; you have to fight for me.’ I was shaken when I was condemned by that judge to die, but I did not give up hope in the God who loves me. I belong to him. Every breath.”

In April of 2011, after nearly a year of heartache and pleading, IJM convened its annual Global Prayer Gathering. Through this gathering in person and online around the world, thousands were mobilized in worship of our good God, and prayer together for Michael.

Six weeks later in a precedent-setting decision, a Nairobi-area judge freed Michael on bail—the first time ever in Kenyan history that someone convicted of a capital offense has been granted bail pending appeal, made possible by a provision in Kenya’s new constitution.

When Michael was freed on bail in the precedent-setting decision, the IJM Kenya team celebrated the judgment – not only because of its historic nature, but because it means that this one elderly, innocent father could return to his family with dignity as he awaited his ultimate vindication.

And vindication did come. IJM continued to advocate for the wrongful conviction to be overturned, and in December 2013 Michael’s name was cleared for good—he was acquitted.

- Though we are not always aware, ours is a world full of victims like Michael. Every day, children, women, and men become victims of slavery, sex trafficking, police abuse of power, sexual assault, domestic violence and any number of other forms of violent oppression.
- If we are to Worship Fully, then we must acknowledge that the God we worship hates this kind of abuse and calls his church to engage it.

6. Worship Fully

- In order to Worship Fully this year, we are going to do two things:
- First, we are going to partner with IJM to loose the bonds of injustice and break yoke of oppression. By adjusting our spending this Christmas, we can give *more*, through IJM, to love the poor in a meaningful way.
 - In the very clear context of Isaiah, this aspect of worship is just as important as our worship within the sanctuary.
- Second, we are going to clear out time and space to listen to God’s voice this season.
 - *Personal worship in solitude and silence:* In a season marked with noise, hurry, and busyness, stepping away from the constant movement is among the more life-giving choices we can make this year.
 - If you have a regular discipline of solitude and silence, great. Spend some time asking God how you might use that time over the next month to enter fully into the miracle of Advent.
 - If not, consider carving out some time each morning or evening—just 10 minutes will go a long way. Sit in a comfortable chair. Read a brief Advent-related passage of scripture and then simply sit in silence inviting God to speak to you.
 - *Family Worship:* Advent is a great time for families to share in the story of Christ’s birth into a broken world. There are many wonderful traditions that can help do this. The use of an Advent wreath⁴ is one of them. It’s a deceptively simple tool to slow us down and quiet the noise so we can listen to the still small voice.

⁴ There are many, many websites out there offering clear explanations of the Advent Wreath and simple liturgies for their use. Some families use them every night, some use them only on Sundays. Your church may already have its own tradition. If not spend a few minutes searching the web for “Advent Wreath” or “Advent Liturgy” and you should come up with some great options you can adapt for your setting.

- If you have regular devotional time with family or a small group, incorporate an Advent wreath and some simple scripture readings and prayers.
- If you don't have regular family worship time, try it for these four weeks! Many families find this to be one of the most deeply valued traditions of the season.
- *Corporate worship*: It can be so easy to let the rush of the season crowd out the things that are important. We'll be working hard to prepare excellent worship times that will be good for our souls. Let's make our meeting together during this season a priority.
- *Choose the Fast that God chooses—Worship Fully*: From Isaiah we learn that God is not interested in religious form without its neighbor-loving function. Over the next several weeks you'll hear much more about what we'll be doing to loose the bonds of injustice and break yokes of oppression in our world. And we'll celebrate more stories like Michael's in a way that will drive us to worship fully.
- Let's enter this Advent season with an attitude like Michael's—full of hope in the “God who knows us inside and out.”
- We will experience God richly, and we will be transformed this season as we Worship God Fully.
- The first Christmas changed the course of the world. If we hold true to these simple commitments, we will make the powerful proclamation that Christmas *is still* changing the world.