Welcome to week two of the Advent Conspiracy. I hope you haven’t told anyone. Conspiracies only work if you keep them secret. Don’t go inviting people to church this Advent season. Don’t talk about the sermon during the week. Pastors hate that. If you go about inviting people to church or talking about the sermon, this won’t be a conspiracy! Shhhhhh.

In week one, we learned that if we want Christmas to mean something, it has to start with worshiping fully, bringing your whole self to the conversation. Because it’s remarkably hard to have a conversation when you’re running around distracted and stressed.

Which brings us to week two. I think we can all agree, that the root of Christmas as we know it today, is consumerism. The lights and the decorations and the sales are there to draw you in.

Jon Stewart had a great take on this. He says, Christmas started on Dec. 25th. One day. Then we added Christmas eve. Then we ran it through Epiphany so we could have 12 days of Christmas. Then we started running sales on black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, to kick off the Christmas season. And this year we added black Thursday – where stores are opening on Thanksgiving day to Black Friday and Cyber Monday.

That’s right, ladies and gentlemen. Christmas is such an amazing consumer holiday that it’s actually eating other holidays. Anyway, the goal of the season is to get you to spend more. So the conspiracy response is obvious, right? Spend less.

We’re all familiar with the crestfallen look on the face of a child who just opened one of those cards that says, “A donation has been made in your name.” You’ve gotten those cards before. My only advice there is make sure it’s a cause they actually care about. But giving donations instead of gifts isn’t the only way to spend less.

Maybe you declare this the year of the homemade present. Maybe you agree as a family that every single present needs to cost under five dollars and seventeen cents. Why? Because it’s fun, and it forces you to be creative. It moves Christmas out of the guilt-ridden, gotta give them something because they gave me something headspace into something more authentic.

Spending less is not the point. It’s a tactic. Suppose you’re carrying a back pack, and it’s loaded down with all your stuff. Most of us couldn’t move. Some of us would be crushed instantly. If, starting this Christmas, we stopped putting more stuff in, would that really help? You’re still stuck with all this stuff on your back! The good news of Christmas is about lightening the load.

Have you noticed how many new storage places there are in the area? You know what they’re full of? Stuff. All the stuff we can’t stuff in our over-stuffed houses. We are not a replace-it kind of people. We’re an add-to-it and pile-it-higher kind of people.

Let me give you an example. How many of you have put up your Christmas tree? Most of us. And how many of you have put all of the trimmings on the tree? Most of us,
again. Now think about the trimmings you put on the tree, and think specifically about the ornaments. Ahh!

Now think back a year. Did you get a new ornament last year? Uh-huh. And the year before that. Uh-huh. And the year before that. Right. And, when you got that new ornament, did you replace an older ornament with the newer one, or did you add to new ornament to the pile of ornaments you already had? Of course you did.

Now think about the tub where you store your ornaments. Are there ornaments in the tub that no longer get hung on the tree, but are simply relegated to the bottom of the Christmas Ornament tub of stuff? Why? Because most of us just don’t get rid of stuff, but add stuff to the top of the stuff we already have until we’re, well, over-stuffed.

**Christmas is about lightening the load.** And not just the stuff. I mean, Jesus didn’t come just to set us free from stuff. Jesus came to set us free. Period. If stuff were the whole problem, we could be magically happy if we just got rid of our stuff. But we don’t get rid of our stuff, and we’re not happier based on the stuff we have.

I’ve met quite a few people who have a lot, and to be honest they didn’t seem very happy. And I’ve met quite a few people who have very little, and they don’t seem very happy, either.

Our attachment to stuff is a symptom of the problem, not the problem itself. The problem is that we’re trying to fill a deeper need within us that we fill with stuff. But it doesn’t matter how much stuff we cram down that bottomless hole. It’s never going to fill.

This advent, don’t just spend less money. Spend less time on distractions. Spend less energy holding grudges. Spend less thought trying to figure out what kind of person the-kind-of-person-you-want-to-be with wants to be with.

Spend less money. Sure. Yes. Obviously! Is there any week in the year when that wouldn’t be good advice? But don’t just hoard cash. Use this as an opportunity to shock your brain into thinking about your life from a higher level. Last week our job was to Worship Fully. Did you?

What did you learn? Where were you focused? Was it on God or on gizmo’s?

Because Christmas is coming. We hear that and we think, “Yay! Cookies and presents and songs!” But that’s not what it meant originally. Listen to this passage from Malachi 3:1-5:

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple… But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire…”

**That’s what Christmas meant. Refiner’s fire.** It meant the world was about to heat up, and the pure silver would rise to the top. It’s not a sweet and gentle metaphor. There’s nothing funny or cute about refiner’s fire. It’s about the reduction of waste, the elimination of impurities, the letting go of whatever is holding you down so you can rise to the top shiny and pure and bright.

God says through Malachi, “…I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers…”. That’s pretty standard stuff, right? People who defraud the simple, people who cheat on their spouse, people who tell lies in court. We can get behind that. Yeah! Go get ‘em God!

But he’s not done. The text continues to say that God will be “quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers…”, AND against those who defraud laborers of their
wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me…”

Uh oh.

It was ok, God, when you were going after wizards. I mean who even knows a wizard? But now you’re talking national politics. Now you’re talking about labor, and foreigners, and medicare, and funding education. Now you’re talking about my money.

Yes. That’s exactly what we’re talking about. Spending less isn’t some nice advice we tell the kids even though we know they won’t really do it. Spending less isn’t a Christmas gimmick. This is an advent conspiracy to undercut the powers and principalities of this present age. Christmas is coming, and it’s time to clean house.

This morning we heard about John the Baptist whose message was that “The king is coming! Everybody look busy.” Right? No! “The king is coming. Get ready.” Let go of your old burdens, forgive old debts, start a new life.

That’s the conspiracy. That’s the secret. And since I know you all to be perfectly obedient pew-sitters, who always do exactly what your pastor tells you, I’ll leave you with one final instruction.

Don’t talk about this at home. Don’t mention it to your friends. And for heaven’s sake don’t invite anyone to the candlelight service on Christmas Eve. Because who knows what might happen. Something might even change. Someone might change. Their whole outlook on Christmas might change. And we certainly can’t have that. This is a church, right?