

December 17, 2017  
Advent 3  
Isaiah 61:1-4; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28  
The Conspiracy of Salvation  
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Fellow Ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ,  
Grace to you and peace from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

There is a vast conspiracy afoot in our midst! Yes! A conspiracy. And we are at the very core of this conspiracy.

In this last frantic week before Christmas, we sit resting in this place; resting in the mystery of the word made flesh, full of grace and truth. We sit in this quiet place considering the testimony of a prophet who comes from the margins of society, John the Baptizer. The leaders of the Temple and the Empire are afraid of him. He is drawing huge crowds out of the city with his outrageous testimony to the light. Word of the conspiracy had made its way to the Temple and the courts of the Roman Empire. The Pharisees sent their priests and Levites out to the wilderness to question John. "Who are you?" they ask.

These rule keepers were fearful that the fragile freedom they were granted under Roman occupation was threatened by this fringe character, John. They want to know who this guy is and what he has to say about himself.

John does not fall into their trap. John does not defend himself. John tells them who he is NOT! Clever, true and not satisfactory answers to their questions. They have to report back to their superiors. John gives them nothing! Except to warn them that someone even greater is coming soon.

A conspiracy! One man, in the wilderness warning the religious leaders that something big is about to happen. A conspiracy! A word sounds secretive, subversive.

When we think of conspiracy we think of nefarious political collusion. Or energy utilities conspiring to subvert the Clean Air Act by hiding evidence of air pollution increases. Remember the corporate conspiracy of the tobacco industry when they lied to us about the health risks of smoking? Or the conspiracies of large oil companies and hedge funds to bilk millions of dollars from unwitting investors?

Politics conjures more conspiracy theories than we can keep up with; left-wing, right-wing, media, evangelical Christians, progressive Christian, you name it. Some of the most frightening conspiracies are those we hear about terrorist sleeper cells planning violent attacks against countries around the world, including our own. Conspiracy can be a frightening word.

However, the word conspiracy takes on a different meaning when we listen to and see the Spirit of God breathing justice into our world.

What if we were to reclaim the word conspiracy? How would we define it in terms of the coming of Jesus the Christ? Let's start with the actual meaning of the word. "con" means "with" in several languages. "Spirare" means to "breathe". Conspiracy then means, literally "to breathe with" or "with breath". Picture a group of people huddled together, whispering in the darkness, breathing the same air of intrigue and intent, working out a secret plan.

John the Baptizer was at the center of conspiracies for his entire ministry. Someone was always after him. Why? Because he was a threat to the status quo. He was a threat to the Empire. He aroused suspicion among the authorities. They worried that he might incite the people to rise against the political and religious leaders.

The leaders send their minions to confront him, demanding to know who he works for. They suspect he is the mastermind of a secret plot, possibly to overthrow the Empire. And he IS a co-conspirator, though a low-level messenger. The real conspirator is standing right there, in the crowd. And the religious leaders don't even know who he is.

How quickly they have forgotten that kerfuffle with Herod and the visitors from the East and the killing of babies? Did they hope that dust-up was long over?

The good news of Jesus Christ does not go away. The good news of Jesus Christ that the prophet Isaiah proclaimed and Jesus himself read from the ancient scroll. God sent Jesus to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

The prophet is not talking about the political and religious leaders, he's talking about those who have come to the wilderness, to the fringe to join the conspiracy, to breathe with John the Baptizer and all who are oppressed, captive and imprisoned under the Empire's rule.

The Empire of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seeks to continue the oppression of the poor, women, people of color, immigrants, LGBTQ people, Muslims . . . the list goes on. We applaud ourselves for the success of the Civil Rights Movement. We scoff at women who only now dredge up decades old allegations of gender misconduct and violence. We seek to deport men and women who have lived and worked here for decades.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century Empire is every bit as fearful of this conspiracy as was the Roman Empire of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. We like to think of the sweet baby Jesus this time of year. We like to sing the gentle and joyful carols of the Christmas season. But, let's be clear here. That sweet baby Jesus grew up to become a very dangerous man, convicted of sedition by the Empire... a conspirator against the Jewish and Roman leaders. What he preaches is diametrically opposed to everything the establishment has worked so hard to put into place. He is so dangerous to the powerful and the privileged that they will arrest him, torture him, throw him in prison and kill him in the most disgraceful way possible – crucifixion, in public, on a cross, raised up for everyone to see his humiliation.

What they don't count on, and what the 21<sup>st</sup> century Empire does not count on is this: They cannot snuff out this conspiracy. A whole new crop of conspirators rose up after Jesus to spread the good news throughout the known world. Pretty soon there were clusters of conspirators using the code name "Followers of the Way" or "Christian" in every major city and every wilderness in between.

You, dearly beloved baptized children of God are part of the holy conspiracy. I know you're skeptical, but a high-level operative in the movement laid hands on you and doused you with water as she spoke the words of initiation into the movement: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit".

We are co-conspirators when we come to this table to receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ.  
We are God's Holy conspirators

May we "breathe with Christ" in this Advent season and beyond.

Thanks be to God!