

**AWAITING THE ALREADY**  
**Advent Worship Series – Week 1**  
***Slow Down, Pay Attention***  
**November 29, 2020**

***Slow Down... Pay Attention***

**Call to Worship:**

Proverbs 4:25-27 says:

<sup>25</sup> Keep *your head up*, your eyes straight ahead,  
and your focus fixed on what is in front of you.

<sup>26</sup> Take care you don't stray from the straight path, *the way of truth*,  
and you will safely reach the end of your road.

<sup>27</sup> Do not veer *off course* to the right or the left;  
step away from evil, *and leave it behind*.

(Proverbs 4:25-27, The Voice)

***Preparing the Way***

**Responsive Reading:**

**Leader:** Today we look at the Gospel of Mark...it's the shortest of the Gospels, and widely regarded to be the first one written. Mark says nothing about the birth of Jesus. There are no angels, no shepherds, no mention of Mary or Joseph, no star, and no manger. Mark begins right off the bat with the preaching of John the Baptist who calls people to repent. Like all the greats of history, Jesus doesn't just arrive—He is announced—and who better than John to do that.

**All:** <sup>2</sup> Isaiah the prophet told us *what would happen before He came*:

Watch, I will send My messenger in front of You  
to prepare Your way and make it clear *and straight*.

<sup>3</sup> *You'll hear him*, a voice crying in the wilderness,  
"Prepare the way of the Eternal One,  
a straight way in the wandering desert, a highway for our God."

**Leader:** <sup>4</sup> *That messenger was* John the Baptist, who appeared in the desert *near the Jordan River* preaching that people should be ritually cleansed through baptism *with water as a sign of* both their changed hearts and God's forgiveness of their sins. <sup>5</sup> People from across the countryside of Judea and from the city of Jerusalem came to him and confessed that they were deeply flawed and needed help, so he cleansed them with the waters of the Jordan.

**John the Baptist:** Someone is coming who is a lot more powerful than I am—One whose sandals I'm not worthy to bend down and untie. <sup>8</sup> I've washed you here through

the Spirit of baptism with water; *but when He gets here*, He will wash you in God.

**Leader:** The Jordan River is the setting of some of the most memorable miracles in the Old Testament. On their journey through the wilderness to the promise land, the Israelites walked across the Jordan River on dry ground because God parted its waters. Elisha, one of the prophets of God, healed Naaman by telling him to bathe seven times in its waters. Partly because of miracles like these and partly because of a growing wilderness spirituality, many of the Jews in John's day are out to hear him and be ritually baptized in the Jordan's cool, cleansing waters. They are looking for God to intervene miraculously in their lives as He has done in the past. What they don't know is that God is about to intervene, for at that time Jesus leaves Nazareth and heads south.

**All:** <sup>9</sup>It was in those days that Jesus left Nazareth (*a village in the region of Galilee*) and came down to the Jordan, and John cleansed Him through baptism there *in the same way all the others were ritually cleansed.* <sup>10</sup> But as Jesus was coming out of the waters, He looked up and saw the sky split open. The Spirit of God descended upon Him like a dove, <sup>11</sup> and a voice echoed in the heavens.

**Voice:** You are My Son, My beloved One, and I am very pleased with You.

**Leader:** By calling us to prepare the way of the Lord through John the Baptist, Mark challenges us to change our hearts and lives and make ourselves ready to receive Jesus, along with everything that entails. He calls us to adopt hearts and lives characterized by a desire to follow Jesus, a willingness to suffer on account of him, and a hope in the glorious future life he has promised us.

*(Awaiting the Already, pp. 13-14;  
Mark 1:2-5, 7-11, The Voice)*

### **Prayer of Confession**

It's starting already, Lord. It is only the first Sunday in Advent, and we are caught up in the pressures and stresses of the holiday season. Pursued by the temptation to spend our funds, our energy, our spirits, we feel that there is no peace or rest in the world. Lord of light and peace, shine on us this day. Forgive us when we have so easily succumbed to the anxieties and fears and temptations of the season. Slow us down. Calm our spirits. Give us an awareness that this is the season of waiting and of preparation. Pour peace into our lives and help us to be bearers of peace to others. For we ask this in Jesus' precious Name. Amen.

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## ***The Preparation of Peace Candle***

### **Lighting of Advent Candle**

**Reader 1:** Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent means “coming,” and in this season we prepare for the coming of Christ. It is a time not only for remembering the coming of Christ in Bethlehem, but also for seeking to recognize him when he comes to us now. Jesus lives in our own times and in our own lives. Yet, too often he is a stranger to us, and we fail to recognize him; we are not prepared.

**Reader 2:** By lighting one candle each week of Advent, we help ourselves get ready for the birth of Jesus. The candles have different meanings, each based upon the Bible. These meanings help us understand how special the birth of Jesus is for us. Today we focus on the candle of Preparation of Peace.

**Reader 1:** <sup>3</sup>“In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. <sup>4</sup>Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. <sup>5</sup>And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:3-5, NIV)

*[Light 1<sup>st</sup> (purple) candle]*

**Reader 2:** Today we light the candle of Preparation of Peace. Let it remind us to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ.

**Prayer:** Almighty God, as we begin this season of Advent remind us again that in the midst of our darkness you are bringing us peace, to calm our anxious spirits and hectic lives. Turn our hearts again toward you. Make us ready to receive your Son our Savior. Slow our pace and give us the blessing of feeling your peace in our spirits. For we ask this in Jesus’ precious Name. Amen.

### **Benediction/Pastoral Prayer**

Lord, how we must try your patience! We rush through the seasons of our lives as though we had a mighty schedule to keep. We plot out our days, minute by minute, crowding each moment with tasks, stresses and pressures. Help us bind ourselves to you, loving God. Help us slow down and reflect on the many ways in which you bless us. Let us drink deeply of your peace. Remind us again of the most precious gift of all, the gift of loving relationship between you and your Creation. May we cherish the people and the peaceful moments you offer to us. As we have lifted before you our joys and concerns, so lift our spirits to remember that you are always with us, offering your healing touch and your compassionate care. Help us to place our trust in you, for we ask it in Jesus’ Name. Amen.

<b>Advent 2020 – Week 1</b>	
<b>DRAMA</b>	
<b>Detour Ahead</b>	
<b>By Martyn Scott Thomas</b>	
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<b>Topic:</b>	Prophecy, Preparation
<b>Scripture:</b>	Isaiah 40:3-5
<b>Synopsis:</b>	A man finds an unexpected construction project near his home.
<b>Characters:</b>	Samuel – a shepherd who lives a solitary life. Duke – a construction worker.
<b>Props/Costumes:</b>	A hard hat and work vest for Duke. 5-6 orange pylons. A small piece of paper.
<b>Setting:</b>	A new construction site.
<b>Running time:</b>	3 minutes

[Duke enters whistling or humming to himself, and places pylons ( KUŽELKY) along the front of the stage.]

**Samuel:** [enters and watches Duke curiously] Excuse me. But what are you doing?

**Duke:** [answers without looking up] Working.

**Samuel:** [a bit confused] I see. But working at what?

**Duke:** [stops, looks up a little frustrated] I'm putting down cones. (KUŽELKY)

**Samuel:** [looking around] Why?

**Duke:** [agitated] Listen, Mack . . .

**Samuel:** [interrupting] It's Samuel.

**Duke:** [continuing] Fine. Listen, [emphasizing] Mack, I don't come around while you're working and interrupt you with unimportant questions, do I?

**Samuel:** I guess not, [emphasizing] Mack.

**Duke:** [correcting] The name is Duke, got it?

**Samuel:** [frightened] Yes sir, I mean Mr. Duke.

**Duke:** Just Duke.

**Samuel:** Right, Duke. Listen I'm sorry for interrupting, but it just seems odd that you're out here in the middle of nowhere putting down cones.

**Duke:** Odd or not, this is what I was hired to do, so this is what I'm doing.

**Samuel:** Do you mind if I ask who hired you?

**Duke:** [*lets out a bothered sigh*] Nope. [*goes back to placing pylons*]

**Samuel:** [*awkward pause*] So, who hired you?

**Duke:** [*stops*] Some guy named Isaiah.

**Samuel:** [*thinking*] Well, there's no Isaiah around here. At least none that I know of.

**Duke:** And you know everyone that lives around here?

**Samuel:** Kind of, since it's pretty much just me.

**Duke:** [*looks around*] Well, I guess it is kind of [*slight pause*] sparse.

**Samuel:** So, who is this Isaiah?

**Duke:** Don't really know. Some mucky-muck from the city.

**Samuel:** Then why aren't you working in the city?

**Duke:** Because I have my orders.

**Samuel:** And what are your orders?

**Duke:** [*sighs, and pulls a piece of paper out of his pocket*] And I quote: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." [*puts paper back in his pocket*]

**Samuel:** Well, this is definitely the desert. But wait, did that say a highway?

**Duke:** Yup.

**Samuel:** But I don't need a highway. It's just me and my sheep.

**Duke:** Sorry, Mack. The highway's not for you. My orders say to build a highway for our God.

**Samuel:** But why does God need a highway? And why here?

**Duke:** Because Isaiah says so.

**Samuel:** But I don't know Isaiah.

**Duke:** Listen, Mack, I can't help you with that. All I know is I was hired to do a job and I'm going to do it. So, if you don't mind. [*shoos Samuel away with his hand*]

**Samuel:** But . . .

**Duke:** Sorry, I have a highway to build.

**Samuel:** And I can't use it?

**Duke:** Not unless your name is God.

**Samuel:** But how am I going to get my sheep to their pasture?

**Duke:** I guess you'll have to take the detour.

**Samuel:** Detour? What detour?

**Duke:** I didn't get the signs up yet, but you'll have to go back that way about a mile or two. [*points offstage*]

**Samuel:** [*disbelieving*] A mile or two? For how long?

**Duke:** Until the highway is finished.

**Samuel:** And when will that be?

**Duke:** I don't know. [*pulls paper from his pocket and scans it*] It looks like about five hundred fifty years, give or take a few. [*puts paper back in his pocket*]

**Samuel:** [*stares at Duke with mouth open*] You can't be serious?

**Duke:** Hey, these things take time.

**Samuel:** But five hundred fifty years?

**Duke:** Yeah, but when it's done . . .

**Samuel:** I'll be dead and gone.

**Duke:** Then it shouldn't be a problem.

**Samuel:** And so will you.

**Duke:** [*thinking*] Yeah, I guess you're right. I still don't see the problem.

**Samuel:** The problem is you're building a highway in my back yard.

**Duke:** Take it up with this Isaiah guy. It's all his idea.

**Samuel:** Maybe I will. *[long pause]* How do I find him?

**Duke:** I guess you'll have to get to the city.

**Samuel:** That could take weeks. In case you didn't notice, we're in the middle of the desert. There are no roads out here.

**Duke:** Yeah, if only there was a highway...

**Samuel:** *[blank stare]*

**Duke:** I'll let the irony of that sink in for a bit.

**Samuel:** *[thinking]* But . . .

**Duke:** *[pointing offstage]* I think I need to get something from my camel. *[exits]*

**Samuel:** *[looking around, confused – realizing, nodding his head]* Oh. A highway.

*[Blackout]*

***AWAITING THE ALREADY***  
**Advent Children's Moment – Week 1**  
November 29, 2020

**Preparation (Getting Ready)**  
*by Martyn Scott Thomas*

*[Call the children of the congregation forward and have them sit around the Narrator's chair.]*

**Narrator:** Today is the first week of Advent – the four weeks before Christmas. For the next few weeks we're going to talk about different parts of the Christmas story.

How many of you are ready for Christmas? *[get responses from the children]*  
How many of you think your parents are ready for Christmas? *[get responses from the children]*  
What are some of the things you or your parents do to get ready for Christmas? *[get responses from the children]*  
How long does it take for them to get ready? *[get responses from the children]*

Going all the way back to the first Christmas when Jesus was born, there were a lot of preparations that needed to be made. What do you think had to be done to get ready for the first Christmas? *[get responses from the children]*

God started making his preparations hundreds of years before Jesus was born. We read in the Bible that God told the prophet Isaiah that someone would shout in the wilderness that it was time to get ready for the Lord. That someone turned out to be John the Baptist, who later helped people get ready to meet Jesus.

So, as we get ready for Christmas, let's remember that a long time ago, God was also getting everybody ready for the first Christmas.

Let's pray. Dear Jesus, we thank you for being born as a baby a long time ago. And we thank you that your Father God helped us all get ready for that first Christmas. Bless us today. Amen.

I'll see you back here next week. [*dismiss the children*]

***AWAITING THE ALREADY***

**Advent Sermon – Week 1**  
***Slow Down, Pay Attention***  
**November 29, 2020**

**By Captain Michael Sjögren**

**Title:** *Slow Down, Pay Attention*

**Scripture:** Mark 1:1-8

Over the next four weeks during our Advent season, we will be surveying the four accounts of Jesus' birth from within the four Gospels. Today we begin with the Gospel of Mark, which is widely regarded to be the first Gospel written. And it's the shortest! But it turns out that Mark actually says nothing—*nada!*—about the birth of our Christ.

There are no angels, no shepherds, no mention of Mary and Joseph, no stable; nothing that we would expect to find in any Christmas play or cantata. In fact, when we first meet Messiah Jesus in Mark, he is already an adult and prepared to begin His earthly ministry.

So why would we even include Mark's Gospel in this series? It certainly doesn't sound a whole lot like Christmas! Well, that's true, but this portion does sound a whole lot like *Advent*. What do I mean by this?

The season of Advent is both a looking forward to the return of Christ (His second coming), as well as a remembrance of His first coming. Advent is a season where Christ's church unites universally with traditions and liturgy to refocus and renew our passionate desire and preparation of the promise and truth that Christ is coming back. He has come already, and He will return to fully establish His Kingdom here on earth.

Mark does an amazing job helping us, as believers in Christ, to do both of those things: to remember and to anticipate. These first couple of verses of Mark 1 also give us wisdom in how we are to live within this time of waiting—these last days.

And I love the irony of today's message title, "Slow Down, Pay Attention," because the entire Gospel of Mark is anything but slow! This book moves us at a fast clip through the life of Jesus. Mark's favorite word is immediately, which he uses 41 times in 16 chapters; three times as much as the other three Gospels combined! So this gives you an idea of how action packed and paced this Gospel is. (Maybe that's why it's personally my favorite Gospel.)

[*Personal illustration:*] I like how Mark pulls you in right from the first words. Maybe that's also why I really enjoy the *Jason Bourne* or *Mission: Impossible* movie series as well. Each of those films are fully action packed right from the first scenes! The tone is quickly set, and these movies grab you and don't let you go until the credits.

Here in chapter one we have John the Baptist bursting onto the scene. He is "*A voice of one calling in the wilderness*" (Mark 1:3). He is grabbing our attention by reminding us as readers that a Messiah has been prophesied for generations and that a messenger will be sent by God to "*Prepare the way for the Lord*" and to "*make straight paths for him.*"

*“And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”* (Mark 1:4). Yes, Mark wants to get our attention, but he also wants us to slow down a bit and pay attention to what the messenger really has to say—because this message is a life changer! These are words that offer the hearers life through repentance.

[*Personal illustration:*] Have you ever seen the production of Handel’s *Messiah*? It’s an oratorio in three parts, centered on the entire life, death, resurrection and ascension/glorification of Christ. The lyrics come directly from scriptural text. You probably have heard pieces from the *Messiah* that are well-known, especially the “Hallelujah” chorus at the end of part 2 (where the audience traditionally stands while it is sung). I recently attended a performance, and while watching it, I found myself during the first couple of numbers looking ahead on the program to see what was coming or maybe what would be familiar to me. I quickly realized that I wasn’t in the moment of what was being performed. I was missing the bigger picture because I was only looking ahead. I had to slow down and just simply pay attention and be present.

That represents how our lives often look, right? We live in such a fast paced and instantaneous result culture that life is constantly just passing us by. Even as believers in Christ we find ourselves engulfed in an artificial world of our own construction rather than a world that invites us into the mysteries of faith and being truly present within moments of trust, of seeing God’s Kingdom come.

Even now, as we enter into this particular season of Advent, we can easily miss the amazing and beautiful opportunities to engage within our faith journey; to be challenged once again in our walk and ready to hear a fresh perspective.

We might even be saying or thinking that we’re not quite ready for Christmas or Advent yet. This could mean that we’re not quite ready for God to once again break into our lives and to renew us or revitalize us because we find ourselves too busy or engrossed in our own self-made world.

But even if we think we are ready for Advent, we probably would naturally jump to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke because we are used to the scenes of shepherds on a hillside being visited by a chorus of angels. We are content with the story of there being “no room in the inn” and the Savior of the world being born in a barn and sleeping in the manger.

That’s our Christmas “comfort zone.” But Mark allows us to not only look back to what Christ *has done*, but also to renew a right spirit within us for today and for our tomorrows. Advent is about getting ready for our returning Messiah. Advent is about changing our behavior and gaining a righteous life perspective today. Advent is about current forgiveness and current repentance.

We’ve established that the first part of chapter one focuses on John the Baptist, the messenger of the coming Christ. All four gospels include the story of John the Baptist, but

Mark is the only one that uses the word “prepare” twice by quoting two prophets—Isaiah and Malachi—together in one thought.

The first time we see the word “prepare” (Mark 1:2) it’s given to us from the Greek word understanding of: constructing or creating, equipping something. There are New Testament portions that use this term in describing the building of the Tabernacle and even Noah’s ark.

Hebrews 9 and 1 Peter 3 also use this form of the Greek word in talking about us as human vessels—bodily homes of God’s love and compassion, His grace.

In other words, Mark is telling us as readers that part of the message being given is that we should make ourselves ready to be sent out as vessels through which God’s love can enter into human history.

Then we have the second use of “prepare” (v. 3) which has a sense of getting something ready for a big event. This idea is cultural in the sense of sending someone out ahead of the arrival of a king—to make the road that he will travel safe, passable, and clear of anything that could harm the arrival.

It’s in this framework of making something ready in anticipation of something that’s going to happen later. By calling us to “prepare the way of the Lord” through John the Baptist, Mark is challenging us today to change our hearts and lives and make ourselves ready to fully receive Jesus today so that we are ready for His return, His coming.

He’s calling us to live with transformed hearts and lives; with a “sold out” desire to follow Jesus, with a willingness to suffer in His Name, but with a hope of the glorious future that He has promised.

So just within these first few verses and by using two aspects of the word “prepare,” Mark is calling us to: 1) make ourselves ready as vessels to receive Jesus, and 2) to participate in Christ’s life, death and resurrection.

You see, Mark will later tell us within his Gospel that Jesus used this same word (prepare) to get ready the Passover meal in Mark 14:15. And it’s during that Passover meal that Jesus commanded us to live sacramentally, or as He said, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19).

Living sacramentally is very much Advent as we consider how we are to live in the now while anticipating what is to come. As Salvationists, we don’t often use the term “living sacramentally,” but it is in our DNA—it’s who we need to be “in Christ.”

Sacraments deal with the extraordinary within the ordinary. Sacraments are life gifts that we may take for granted, but God uses them to overwhelm us with His surprising and matchless graces. Sacraments transform our ordinary lives.

God gives us extraordinary sacramental things like: Christ’s saving sacrifice, His inclusive fellowship, His call to discipleship, His continued forgiveness.

God also gives us sacramental within the ordinary things like: a meal shared with those we love and care about, or a meal shared with a complete stranger or someone who may be ostracized in their life context. Something ordinary like meeting the practical need of a fellow human in Jesus' name.

How about a time of public declaration to God's saving and keeping grace through enrolments or dedications? Christ is the one true original sacrament and He continually invites us to remember His life, death and resurrection through the ordinary and extraordinary.

As sacramental people we discover that He is living and at work within our everyday life experiences. And when we recognize this, we celebrate the blessings, the transformation, the reconciliation and the joy in our own stories by connecting them with the broader story—the reality of Jesus.

Together we are a sacramental community, and as we experience this Advent season together, we need to be a people engaged within the present. It's healthy to celebrate the goodness of God together, and as we continue to stumble (so to speak) within His continued graces and gifts, we recognize them and corporately give Him the glory because He continues to do great things!

As we visit the nursing homes, it should be a sacramental moment as we invite Christ to come and be present. As we engage within our Advent worship opportunities over the next few weeks, these are truly sacramental community moments as we affirm Christ's presence within them and He receives glory. As we pray with those who will come to us for Christmas gifts or food, these are truly sacramental moments.

Is this making some sense? As we live sacramentally today, we live (as Mark tells us in chapter one) as "preparers"—living out the presence of Christ among us—right here and right now. To await Jesus' return is to also acknowledge Jesus is already in our midst because He came the first time and He is the risen Savior of the world.

Although Mark is the only Gospel writer to use the two Greek forms of "prepare" within one general thought, all the Gospel writers agree that the best way to prepare for the arrival of Jesus is to make His paths straight (v. 3). This terminology or imagery given by Isaiah is repeated in Matthew and Luke and its idea is throughout John's gospel, so it must be significant; it has to have importance.

Essentially what it's referring to is a common theme throughout the entire scriptures: producing a holy and Christ-centered life. It's a walk focused on maturity within our faith journey.

Proverbs 4:25-27 (CEB) says, *"Focus your eyes straight ahead; keep your gaze on what is in front of you. Watch your feet on the way, and all your paths will be secure. Don't deviate a bit to the right or left; turn your feet away from evil."*

[*Personal illustration:*] When we lived in Roscoe, Illinois, prior to officership, we had a lot line at our home that wasn't fully parallel. It veered to the right on one end. It wasn't something that I would think about until I had to mow the lawn because if I didn't look at a certain fixed point of a fence post, the line would be off and either I was on my neighbor's yard or not mowing fully on mine. I had to stay focused in order to mow a straight line.

This is very much what the writer in Proverbs and Isaiah are talking about with our Christian journey. Since we are prone to sin, we are susceptible to veering off our journey of holy living, leaning into the left or swerving to the right. We are unable to walk a straight line on our own, there's no doubt about it.

We need external cues. We must rely on the Spirit's leading in order to make our paths straight. That is good advice for this Advent! If we want to walk a straight path, we must stop strictly focusing on ourselves. We need to stop looking at the ground and not turn around to only see where we came from.

The only way to walk a straight line is to focus on the One who is ahead of you. If only we can fix our eyes on Jesus, making our paths straight. Then, and only then, will our lives reflect Him and make ourselves fully ready for His return. Only then will others see Christ in us and through us.

Hebrews 12:12-14 (CEB) says, *"So strengthen your drooping hands and weak knees! Make straight paths for your feet so that if any part is lame, it will be healed rather than injured more seriously. Pursue the goal of peace along with everyone—and holiness as well, because no one will see the Lord without it."*

This is certainly an Advent message we've heard today from Mark. We need to slow down and be present in our current situations. The truth Mark gives us, in verses 2 and 3, is that we need to be doubly prepared. We need to allow the inner work through God's Holy Spirit to change our hearts. May we be people of repentance within this Advent season and confess the things that are not in line with the straight path of righteousness.

May we be vessels ready to receive the hope and salvation that God desires us to have through His Son Jesus. Also, may we sense sacramental moments in the ordinary and extraordinary. May our lives in Christ be enriched because we invite Him into our every day and every moment.

It would be easy to just let this Advent season fly by. We're busy enough, we are complacent enough in our faith. Yet Christ wants to do even more within us. So let's pay attention, let's slow down and allow the Incarnate One to be the amazing Savior that He is!