

## **Advent-ually We'll Get There**

Have you ever been part of a group that was different, unique, or even a little bit weird? I feel like this describes my whole life, as I've always been really into random nerdy things that are outside the (quote unquote) "norm." I could give numerous examples, but one that drives home the point quickly is how my friends and I in high school spent every break period of our day playing either hacky sack or ultimate frisbee. While most of our peers were socializing, doing homework, or meeting with teachers, we could be found out in the courtyard doing two activities that no one else was really into at the time. Ultimate Frisbee has of course become more popular nowadays, but hacky sacking is still an odd hobby to have.

Now, it would be one thing if my friends got into these activities and I followed, but usually I was and am the one that is encouraging those around me to try something new or different. I get really excited and passionate about new things and my closest friends will tell you that it can be exhausting to keep up with me. This is because of the fact that I don't just try out a new activity, but rather deep dive into every aspect of it. For instance, when we started playing hacky sack, I didn't just want to get good at juggling and keeping it up in the air. Instead, I sought to learn as many tricks as I could. I began with simple ones such as stalling where you catch it on your foot and stop the momentum. Then I learned how to rainbow where you hit it on the outside of one foot, over your head, and hit it on the outside of your other foot. And toward the end, I was doing jokers, pop up starts, shoulder catches, and more. I don't think I've kicked a hacky sack since high school, other than with JohnPaul during youth group a couple times, but I've still got it.

### **(VIDEO, straight into sermon slide)**

Of course, I'm sure that none of you expected to come to church during Advent and learn this much about an odd hobby of mine, but I promise there is a point to it all. Our Gospel passage that we just heard Linda read, described a different, unique, and maybe even weird community who were gathering in the wilderness and played an important part in preparing the way for Jesus. As is often the case, God was working in a peculiar and new way in the moments leading up to Jesus' arrival. This is what we will explore this morning as we ground ourselves in the second week of Advent.

Today we lit the peace candle and continue our journey through the Advent season. As Pastor Emily mentioned last week, Advent is a time of preparation, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus long ago and look forward to and hope for Jesus' coming again. In our day to day lives, I find that each week of Advent tends to get more and more hectic as Christmas approaches. Finals come around for those of us in school, workloads escalate as companies try to close out the year, and families frantically prepare for gatherings and check off gift and letter lists. In this season of preparation, our time is constantly being vied for by what feel like important to do's. Yet, Advent is meant to be an invitation to slow down and get ready for Christ. It is my hope that this week we can reorient our advent journey to focus in more on the things that matter most. We know that Advent-ually we'll make it to Christmas, but what we do along the way can make all the difference.

So, to get us started, let's consider this odd group that gathered in Matthew's Gospel and prepared the way for Jesus long ago...

I love these first verses of Mark, because they are all about the Good News of Jesus. The book of Mark is not the first Gospel chronologically in our Bibles, but it was the first one written. This means that the Gospel of Mark, and these first 8 verses, are the first words that many people read about Jesus. Taking a moment to pause and reflect on them, we see that the story of Jesus begins in a surprising way. Let's recall what we heard moments ago...

### **(SCRIPTURE 1)**

Verse 1: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." So, it begins by telling us what this book is about. It's about the good news of Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God. Simple to understand.

### **(SCRIPTURE 2)**

Then we move to verses 2 and 3: "As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" Alright. So the good news is the realization of what was declared long ago by the prophet Isaiah. This is to take place in the wilderness and someone is going to cry out. Then we hear who this mysterious figure is.

### **(SCRIPTURE 3)**

Verse 4: "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." So, this guy John, out in the wilderness is the one who prepares the way for Jesus and he does so by proclaiming baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

Now, I know what you might be thinking. This isn't the Advent or Christmas story that I am used to! Where are Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the angels, and the animals in the barn? Don't they prepare the way for and welcome Jesus? Well, yes they do, but not in Mark's Gospel. In fact, Mark skips over the birth of Jesus entirely and launches right into Jesus' ministry and Baptism, which takes place right after verse 8. This is surprising for many of us, but importantly shows that there is a different type of preparation happening here that relates to the season of Advent.

### **(SERMON SLIDE)**

Similar to a group of friends playing hacky sack at school, John led a group of people into the wilderness to do something different and a bit odd. To paint this picture, it is helpful to know that Judaism was very centered around the temple in Jerusalem at that time. This is where people would gather, offer sacrifices, and was the fulcrum of the Jewish faith. Jesus, as the Jewish Messiah, might have been expected to make his grand entrance there. Yet, it was not in the temple, but rather out in the wilderness that the way was prepared.

And what were they doing out in the wilderness? Getting baptized, repenting, and being forgiven of their sins through it. I don't know about you, but it is surprising to me that this was drawing people from far and wide. **(SCRIPTURE)** Verse 5 says that, "People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." There is a bit of hyperbole, as I'm guessing that not every single person living in Jerusalem came out to John in the wilderness, but the author of Mark is driving home the fact that this was a big deal and there was a lot of buzz about what John was doing. Something was happening in the Jordan that was exciting people and

drawing them into this odd community. This same thing continues to happen today when people do new or odd things. **(SERMON SLIDE)**

Thinking back on my hacky sacking days, I remember how people would often come up and ask to join in. Even when most of us were seniors, my little brother and his freshman friends would come and play with us. There were members of the school's soccer team that would jump in from time to time and try to show off their skills, students who had never kicked a hacky sack before often wanted to give it a try after seeing how much fun we were having, and even professors would sometimes join us for a few rounds before class started. There was something to this odd activity that drew people in and made them curious. I wonder if that was the same for people long ago when they heard about this John guy out in the Jordan river.

What John was doing in the wilderness captured the attention of those around him. And the thing that John was doing was simply preparing the way for someone else. **(SCRIPTURE)** John proclaimed that, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." It is here that John paves the way for Jesus and this is where the passage brings us into the season of Advent.

As we discussed earlier, Advent is an invitation to slow down, get ready, and prepare in a season and time that encourages us to do the opposite. The church's advent season is counter cultural to what society is up to at this time of year, just as John's community was counter cultural in his time. We know that these weeks of Advent are usually hectic as finals are happening, budgets are needing to be met for the year, people are working overtime, and gifts are being purchased for the big day ahead. Yet, these things don't prepare us for what is most important. They don't truly prepare us for Jesus.

At youth group a couple weeks back, we watched a video about the true meaning of Advent by Father Mike Shmitz. I found it very helpful and challenging, as it made me rethink my preparations for the Advent season. This was because of two questions that he asked. The first was: **(SLIDE) What if this Christmas, December 25, 2023, was the day that you died? And the second followed, How would this make you embrace advent differently this year?** So again, What if this Christmas, December 25, was the day that you died? How would this make you embrace advent differently this year?

If we pause for a moment to truly consider these questions, I believe something powerful happens. Suddenly, our shopping lists, decorations, and the stresses of the season begin to fade as we are forced to focus in on what is actually most important in our lives. Things like spending time with family, praying, forgiving others, reading scripture, and talking with God rise to the top of our priority list as we prepare to meet Christ face to face at our death. It also removes some of the weight and stress that this time of year brings as our finances, grades, popularity, and other things in our lives become less burdensome.

### **(Sermon Slide)**

The truth is that Advent-ually Christmas will be here. This year, as with many years, the advent season could come and go in the blink of an eye without us realizing it. Or, we could do something different, unique, and maybe a little bit weird by the world's standards. We could follow John's example and prepare for Jesus in ways that we have never tried before. What would it look like for you to embrace this advent season in a new way? Might you want to

intentionally take time to pray each day, read scripture more, go on a prayer walk, ponder the Christmas story, or spend more time with loved ones and friends? Each of us are on our own unique Advent journeys, but together we are seeking to Prepare the way for Jesus. So ultimately the question is: what would help you prepare for Jesus?

**(Questions SLIDE)**

I'd like to end with those same two challenging questions from Father Mike. What if this Christmas, December 25, 2023, was the day that you died? How would this make you embrace advent differently this year? The advent journey continues. Amen.

Let us stand and sing about this odd community out by the Jordan as we sing hymn 96.