

# WIDE AWAKE

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*ISAIAH 2:1-5; ROMANS 13:11-14*  
*LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH*  
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*DECEMBER 1, 2013/1<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT*

One of the first things I did on Tuesday morning upon arriving back from our holiday was catch up on my homework 😊.

I am part of a group of five young-ish pastors from across Canada who are participating in a Mennonite Church Canada program called “Transitioning into Ministry.” Basically this means that we get together online every few months with a coach and discuss the ups and downs and ins and outs of pastoral ministry.

There are also articles to read, case studies to examine, and, this week, a video to watch.

The video was called “How Great Leaders Inspire Action” and was delivered by author Simon Sinek at a TED Talks forum in Puget Sound, WA.

Now, I am ordinarily pretty cynical about gimmicky titles like this, but when I watched the video, I actually got what I think was a pretty good window into our texts this morning, the season of Advent that is upon us, and how the life of faith works in general.

Sinek is famous for what he calls “The Golden Circle.”

*(show diagram on PPT.)*

What Sinek says is that most of us proceed from the bottom to the top.

Virtually all of us are reasonably sure that we know what we are doing from day to day.

Many of us have a pretty good handle on how we do what we do (the techniques and strategies that we use to best accomplish what needs to be accomplished.

But fewer people know *why* they do what they do. Fewer people are aware of the big picture, the “why do I get out of bed in the morning?” question, the broader understanding of what is the motivating drive behind all of the things that we do every day, regardless of what sphere of life we are talking about.

And so, Sinek says, we tend to go from the clearest thing to the fuzziest thing. We start with “what” and “how”—the practical nuts and bolts of everyday life—and then maybe get around to why if we have time to think about it.

Maybe. Someday.

What Sinek tells us is that the usual way that we do things needs to be exactly reversed.

Sinek says that *wherever* we are and *whatever* we are doing, we will be more effective, more compelling, more engaged, more passionate... if we start from the **why** and then work out to the **how** and the **what**.

Over and over throughout the lecture, he repeated the following phrase:

“People don’t buy what you do they buy why you do it.”

Start with **why** and the rest will follow.

What about an example?

Kids, I want you to think of your favourite things to do. Maybe it’s playing guitar or piano or soccer or judo or whatever.

How many of you would have been super enthusiastic about pursuing any of these activities, if I had come to you and said, “OK, I have a bunch of scales for you to practice on the piano... or finger exercises for the guitar... Or drills to work at with a soccer ball... and I want you to really, really work at these for a long time and then we’ll talk about the next step?”

Do you think you would have been interested? (I doubt it!)

In each case you started with a bigger vision right? You saw a guitarist in a rock band and wanted to learn how to play like that. Or you heard a beautiful piece of

music on the piano or the violin, and it blew you away. Or you saw a brilliant goal in soccer and you wanted to play like that.

In each case, the **why** came before the **what** and the **how**, right? You started with a vision of the end goal before you ever picked up the guitar or kicked a ball.

And, of course the rest of us could think of our own examples.

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Ok, so what does any this have to do with Advent? What does this have to do with Isaiah's vision or Paul's letter to a church in Rome?

Well, I think we have a **why** text and a **what** and a **how** text before us today.

Let's follow Simon Sinek's advice and start with why.

In Isaiah 2, we are given a vision of the future toward which God is pulling all of history—the future which the coming of Jesus represented the decisive turning point.

We have pictures of

- the nations streaming to God's holy mountain—this powerful symbol in the Hebrew imagination of God's ultimate rule and reign in the world.
- a people who are hungry to learn God's ways and to walk in God's paths
- God, the righteous judge, dealing fairly and justly with human beings
- swords being beaten into plowshares and spear into pruning hooks (as in the image)—weapons of war being turned into tools for food, the cold steel that was used to bring pain and division now being used to bring people together to share and be nourished
- no more war
- *shalom*
- an invitation to walk in the light

This is the **why** behind the life of faith. This is the end goal.

And, of course, we know more of the story than Isaiah did. We know that that the hope to which Isaiah's writings pointed would be fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, who came to be born as a baby, to live, teach, heal, preach, die, rise from the dead, and, one day, return for the last chapter of the story. This is what Advent

is leading us toward—God’s inbreaking into the story, to pull it one step closer to the vision Isaiah talked about.

In our Romans text, Paul tells us about the **what** and the **how** that are meant to proceed *from*, to grow up *out of* the soil of the **why**.

To a fledgling church in Rome, trying to figure out how to be faithful to Jesus in the context of the oppressive Roman Empire and a whole host of competing allegiances, Paul says:

- wake up!
- salvation is near
- lay aside works of darkness and put on the armour of light!
- live honourably, don’t revel in drunkenness and licentiousness
- don’t be petty and quarrel in jealousy
- don’t gratify your sinful nature, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ!
- Wake up!!

And here is the *really* important part for us to remember as another Advent Season dawns.

We do all of these “whats” and “hows” that Paul is talking about (and others, too) not out of grim duty or because God likes to make us miserable or doesn’t like to see us having fun or anything like that.

We avoid the things that Paul is talking about because we believe that participating in these things is unworthy of the future to which we have been called and captivated by!

We put on the Lord Jesus Christ because our current clothes don’t fit as well as we think they do. We are broken, sinful people whose desires and inclinations are often *disordered*.

We do all this because Jesus has given us a better target to aim for, a better vision about our purpose and destiny as human beings!

Many people associate the church with rules. Do this. Don’t do that. Avoid this. Make sure you do that. Rules, rules, rules...

It seems to me that when the church gives this impression of what the life of faith is about, we have gotten the order wrong.

We have placed **what** and **how** before **why**.

What if, instead of starting with lists of dos and don't's, we were to say...

***We have been given a picture of a God's magnificent future. It is a future of peace and justice for everyone, a vision of love and harmony, and of human beings finally being what we were made to be and to do as God's image bearers, and I can't help but try to do everything we can to make sure our lives match this now!***

What if we were to say,

***I have been forgiven and redeemed and set free from a life of bondage to selfish and destructive desires and I can't help but reflect this in the choices that I make in daily life!***

Our Advent theme is the mystery of Christ's dwelling. For this week, the emphasis is on Christ's dwelling in our present.

It's easy to forget that God dwells in our present. This is why we tend to "fall asleep." It's easy to sleepwalk through life, putting one foot in front of the other, following rules, moving from task to task to task, doing "whats" and "hows" because we've always done them a certain way...

Our texts this morning are meant to jolt us out of our slumbers and to remind us of the astonishing reality that there are traces of God all around us, every day—that God is not some remote figure that exists far out there somewhere, but is the God who is around and within and behind and in front of us every day.

Isaiah and the Apostle Paul want us to be wide-awake to the reality that the biggest **why** of all—God's vision for creation and God's very presence in the world—is present amidst all the **whats** and **hows** of our everyday lives.

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A final quote from Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart. This is from his book, *The Experience of God*:

My chief desire is to show that what is most mysterious and most exalted is also that which, strangely enough, turns out to be most ordinary and

nearest to hand, and that which is most glorious in its transcendence is also that which is humblest in its wonderful immediacy, and that we know far more than we are usually aware of knowing, in large part because we labor to forget what is laid out before us at every moment, and because we spend so much of our lives wandering in dreams, in a deep but fitful sleep.

We forget what is laid out before us at every moment—the very presence of Immanuel, God *with* us... A vision to live by... Hope and meaning for living in this mixed up, in-between time between Christ's first and second Advents.

So, with the prophet Isaiah, let us walk in the light of the Lord.

With the apostle Paul, let us put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now is the moment to wake up, for salvation is near. Salvation is always near.

Amen.

