

**Sermon on Mark 13:24-37 and Isaiah 64:1-9  
First Sunday of Advent  
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November 27, 2011**

This past week, Americans celebrated Thanksgiving. But it seems these days that the average American is struggling to find things for which to be thankful. A recent Newsweek poll shows that we as a nation are in a gloomy mood. Seventy-six percent of those asked think the country is on the wrong track. Seventy percent say Americans were much better at solving problems 25 years ago ([thedailybeast.com](http://thedailybeast.com), September 11). We look around us and we become glum. How can we help it?

For instance, as we watched and listened to news accounts in the last weeks of the abuse scandal concerning coaches at Penn State, I despaired. All I heard about is what this will do to the football program and to the reputation of the school. I heard next to nothing about the horror inflicted on these boys who are now men. Where is the compassion? Where is the outrage? Has football become so important that it trumps the lives of children?

And then, the Occupy Wall Street movement, whether you are for or against it, casts light on the incredible disparities in the economic well-being of people in our country. It also goes farther to point to the dysfunctional government that is ours today, our low educational standards, and our incredible willingness to keep spending when we already owe possibly more than we can ever pay back.

In the world scene, we watch the effects of the “Arab Spring”. Dictators were overthrown, and now unknown forces must fill the political offices and government functions. What will happen in the midst of such unrest?

We look at Africa where poverty, unrest, and genocide continue to ravage countries. Millions of people have been displaced or killed. Hundreds of thousands more starve. When will it end?

In our own lives, dear friends and family members are dying. Some sit in waiting rooms facing life-threatening diagnoses. Teenagers despair and find the only answer in thoughts of suicide. Families break apart. Jobs are lost. Loneliness punctuates days.

Does it seem strange to begin the season of Advent with such despairing words and thoughts? It certainly does to me especially when I have begun receiving sappy Hallmark cards about the joy and beauty of the season. Isn't this supposed to be the time when we usher joy into the world? Aren't we supposed to be merry and bright? Isn't this the time when we put out lights to brighten up the night and hope-filled carols burst from our mouths to fill up the air? Isn't this the time when we sit before the warm fire, sipping hot chocolate in comfort?

Isaiah, the Psalmist, and Mark all tell us that we can't go there quite yet. First, we need to face how bad it is. We humans have really screwed things up. We have made a mess of it. And we need to sit within that mess for awhile. “We have become like one who is unclean. Our iniquities take us away like the wind,” says Isaiah. The Psalmist says the people have drunk tears by the bowlful and are the object of scorn and mockery from their neighbors. Mark says that before

the coming of Christ, the sun will be darkened and the moon won't give its light. Stars will fall from their places and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. The lives of the people are misery, and the scriptures call out for deliverance from a God who doesn't seem to be listening.

We need to sit with the misery of our own world, to see how bad it really is so that we can remember that the coming of the Christ into the midst of the world isn't just ordinary. It isn't easy. And it isn't something we should take for granted while we relax, sipping our hot chocolate. How can we yearn for what is to come if we don't even acknowledge what is present? How can we wait for deliverance when we don't own up to the mess of now?

But then, Mark leads us into watchfulness. This can seem like a passage meant to scare us into bucking up and acting right. It can be a parable we read as though our elementary school principal were shaking his finger at us telling us to watch out because he is watching and there will be big trouble if we don't act right.

But remember, the one who is coming is the same one who left. The one who is coming is, as Preacher David Zerson says, the one that loved us to death on a cross and opened the future to us in his resurrection. He is the one who sees us as we are, where we are, and loves us into new life. He is the one who lived here with us in the midst of human pain, suffering, and heartache. He is the one who is coming. He is the baby who is born again and again into our lives and into the world. So, let us wait together, with our eyes, ears, and hearts open for the one who comes bringing hope out of despair, love out of hatred, joy out of

sorrow, healing out of brokenness. The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light. Amen.