

# First Sunday of Advent

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## Introduction

The reading for the first Sunday in Advent sounds like it could be the opening words to a dystopian film. There is no light, whether by day or night, and even heaven is shaken by a great power. That which is predictable becomes unpredictable and the rhythms of a day become fraught with the need to be prepared.

Be prepared for what?

This text circles the drama at the heart of the writing of Mark's gospel: the fall of a great city, somewhere that once was so central is a ruins of itself. In a way, it almost seems like a dramatic retelling of Jesus' words to Mary Magdalene at the end of John's gospel when he says to her "*do not cling to me*". The readers of this Advent Sunday's text are being told: do not cling to the things that you think will give you stability, because if they fall, then you might too. Be prepared.

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## Text

Mark 13:24–37

"But in those days, after that suffering,  
the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light,  
and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.  
Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.  
Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the

watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

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## Comment

Today’s text can read like something from a piece of fiction: the Hunger Games, or Star Wars, or some other fantastical drama. The images — darkness; lightless suns; lightless moons; stars falling from heaven; visions in the clouds; angels coming to gather the chosen — conjure up distressing images of unpredictability, as well as the unspoken threat of the fate of those who are not the chosen.

Interestingly, the word for *elect* or *chosen* in Greek is *eklektos* a word meaning “selected” or “chosen” or “possessing excellence” but a word which has influenced modern English’s word “eclectic”. It demonstrates to us, even in the history of language, how what is seen as superior or favoured in one era can be seen as marginal or even peculiar in the next.

This detour into etymology is appropriate in the consideration of dystopia. While the melodrama of the first Sunday of Advent’s gospel text seems distant, it isn’t. In the air as we prepare for this most luscious of church seasons are threats of war, immature leaders throwing their bruised egos around, rising awareness of the impact of plastic on seas, a refugee crisis that is causing widespread displacement, policies on asylum being written by people whose forebears sought asylum, and inflated bluster that is threatens even peaceful countries. And this is only what is making the headlines: there are countless wars and skirmishes, bombs and bewildermments that are everyday for many but make the headlines for none.

And so our text for the opening of Advent is a text that causes us who are wandering into the season of Christmas to take heed. The world is an unpredictable place. There are wars and there are disappointments that can shake your foundations like dynamite in heaven.

Nestled into the midst of this text is a small consolation. While listening to “be prepared” and “keep awake” and “you do not know the hour” we hear the following:

*My words will not pass away.*

What are these words that will not pass away? Of course, you could write a theological essay, but the answer is the simplest and most difficult one. The words are words of love. That we are created for and by love. That in the midst of enmity, love is the practice and vocation of the believer.

So in a time of violence we do what we know is good even if we don’t feel it. We practice the virtue of love. We are alert, yes. We are prepared, yes. We are cautious, yes. We are aware that things we depend on may disappoint us, yes. But we also hang onto the eternal word, which is always love, the source of our courage and the source of our hope. This word can be the thing we hope for when we are in political turmoil. In such turmoil, we don’t need a doctrine of predestination, of the damed and the delighted. We do it ourselves, separating ourselves into camps of the similar and sharing stories of the other. Perhaps it is time to consider that in our separate groups it’s time to tell stories of love and gratefulness for the virtues of the other. This doesn’t demean their political differences, but it does deplete their power to cause us to be seized by fear.

All of this can seem dramatic if the main anxiety is whiskeying the Christmas cake regularly. But many of us do live in times of testing. There are anxieties about money, anxieties about stress, there are anxieties about addictions and old stories rising up from the sap. The sun and moon don’t have to fade in order for us to feel like everything is shaken. We may be living with grief, or worry about a job, or a disgrace, whether public or private. In all of these: be prepared, be alert, be wise, but also, hold onto the word, which is always love.

When I was 24 and my best friend had died, I was living on the other side of the planet. Everything was strange in a new world where the young died and prayer seemed hollow. In the midst of those first weeks of shock, I became aware of the simplest kindness: a woman who worked in a bank asked me if I wanted a glass of

water; a stranger asked me directions and thanked me most warmly; a bus driver waited for me while I ran to catch the bus; a friend posted a card even though we saw each other weekly; a colleague made it easy for me to take an hour off on a bad day. Everything had ended, but these things remain.

The texts of Advent lead us into the season of Christmas by being the opposite of tinsel. They are guts. They are texts to feed us when we're hungry. In a time of trial, it is food we need, not fancy. And it is good to practice this hunger. Love is what sustains us. Love is what supports us in times of trial. Love is the practice and the eternal word.

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## Response

In a group, consider how it is that the time of Advent can be a time of truth-telling (about the distresses in the community, in a life, in the parish, in the world).

And then consider what love looks like in these times. What small gestures make a season sustainable?

And then consider how to enact love. I know a woman who writes a kind letter once a week. Sometimes to a preacher, sometimes to a politician, sometimes to a librarian, sometimes to a friend. A small act, but over 10 years, over 500 people received something that echoed the word that never fades: love.

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## Prayer

Jesus of the dramatic word,  
from you we sometimes hear dystopia,  
of suns and moons and clouds and skies all falling.  
And we miss the small words of love  
that can sustain us through the winter.  
In the dramas of our news cycles,  
helps us all — parishioners, preachers and politicians —  
to enact love in the corners, queues and questions  
of our day,  
and in so doing discover you,  
hiding in the corner,  
reaching out, like you always did,  
creating community.  
Amen.