

I. Intro.:

(physical re-enactment of Isa. 64 desperation: stomp up on platform ... angrily take off blazer & throw it down ... yell at God ... fall to knees, shake fists @ heaven ...e.g. of adapting excerpts from The Message)

I've had enough of you, God! Look down from heaven ... look at us!

I wish you would rip open the heavens & come down, make the mountains shudder at your presence, like you used to do! Everything's going to hell now, and it's a mess down here!

How long, God? How long are you going to sit there unmoved?

Aren't you going to say something ... do something?
Haven't you made us miserable long enough?

Is there any hope for us?

Can we be saved? *(standing back up & returning to pulpit)*

II. Now why would I break into a tirade like that?

A. Do you think that was a little excessive, uncalled for? I don't think so.

1. Actually, I think we tend to forget the real tone of Isa. 64 ...
2. Or else we just prefer our Scriptures to be tamed down, toned down & neutralized so that we can just go back to our comfy little homes and shut out the world's ugliness while we do Christmas
3. No, I don't think that was uncalled for ... If you've paid any attention to the news in the past month, you too have to be asking, "Is there any hope for us?"

B. Frustration & rage at racial discrimination & injustice in our country has spilled over again & again:

1. On the streets of Chicago, Baltimore, Ferguson & cities all over the country
2. At the University of Missouri & other college campuses
3. In Charleston, South Carolina when even a church Bible study became the site of a massacre ...
4. REFRAIN: *O that you would rip open the heavens & come down!*

C. On Friday the 13th we saw horror films played out on our TVs and computers, but they were not some Hollywood slasher movies, they were real life in Paris after terrorist attacks

1. Oh the pain of hundreds of grieving families this year, not just in Paris, but in Beirut, in the Sinai, in Iraq, in Mali, in Nigeria!
2. The icy cold hands of fear throttle everyone who's scared to go to public places, everyone who looks suspiciously at any stranger
3. The icy cold hands of fear have infected our congress and governors who are willing to revictimize Syrian refugees who are already the victims of terrorism
4. REFRAIN: *O that you would rip open the heavens & come down!*

D. It's not just big social justice issues far away from here

1. It's miscarriages of morality in our own nearby communities
2. Children & teens being seduced or abused by teachers, coaches, janitors whom they trusted ... in school districts not far from here
3. REFRAIN: *O that you would rip open the heavens & come down!*

E. And sadly we feel it even in the church ...

1. Bitter disagreements about interpreting the Bible and responding to homosexual people are tearing apart conferences ...
2. Many are wondering about the very survival of our Mennonite denomination which we merged out of two, only 13 years ago
3. The church of Jesus (in its Mennonite traditions) may not be torn apart... but its institutional forms are hanging on by a thread
4. REFRAIN: *O that you would rip open the heavens & come down!*

III. Today, on the 1st Sunday of Advent, we're getting ready for Christ's birth

A. We long to sing "To us a child of hope is born" but if we let ourselves fully enter the many faces of suffering all around us, that song might sound rather hollow

1. Will the child of hope who provides us reasons for feasts & glittering Christmas trees and glorious music and high-tech gifts ... will that child provide any hope to low-income people here in Goshen who live in conditions like this?



2. The struggle of what I'm talking about is captured poignantly in a Randy Stonehill song from about 25 years ago, called "Christmas at Denny's" (ref. to the 24-hour restaurant chain that is often open on holidays for people who have nowhere else to go) [\[play track segment\]](#)

B. We look forward to the celebration of Christmas ...

1. but it would be a false & deluded celebration unless we honestly named how badly we still need hope in today's world
2. Advent is not only about looking back to when God in Jesus Christ MADE a grand entrance into our world once long ago ...
3. Advent is also about looking forward to Christ's next and final grand appearance ... the one that will set all things right at the end of this world as we know it [\[blank PPT\]](#)

C. And it's that 2nd future coming of Christ to which our passage from Mark 13 is making reference

1. I acknowledge that Mark 13 is one of the most notoriously difficult texts in the New Testament to interpret
2. There are wildly different interpretations ... a lot depends on the basic assumptions that one brings to this text
3. So let's look at it a little, to better understand what it tells us (& doesn't tell us) about the next Advent of Christ

IV. (Understanding Mark's "little apocalypse" for today)

A. This morning we only read the last 1/3 or so of ch. 13, but really the chapter should be read as a whole, to be understood

1. It starts with Jesus walking with his disciples out of the grand structure of Herod's Temple in Jerusalem
 - a) Jesus had just been teaching inside the Temple, where he affirmed the great value of the tiny monetary contribution that a poor widow gave for God's work
 - b) After these teachings, the beginning of ch. 13 tells us that as Jesus & his disciples come out of this massive stone Temple structure, some of his disciples can't help but be very impressed by its magnitude

c) And why shouldn't these rural fishermen from Galilee be impressed?

Herod built up the whole Temple Mount area much larger & grander than Solomon's Temple, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians more than 600 years earlier ...

Here's one reconstruction of what the temple might have looked like:



Model of Herod's Temple in the time of Jesus

In fact, there was a rabbinic saying in those days about Herod's Temple: "*Whoever has not beheld Herod's building, has not seen anything beautiful in his life.*" ([Anchor Bible Dictionary](#), Vol. 3, p. 167)

2. As the disciples are admiring it from across a nearby valley, they call Jesus' attention to the large stones & the large buildings where the Jews believed God made his earthly dwelling

a) Jesus surprises them by not being so impressed. In [The Message](#), we hear it this way from Jesus' mouth:

You're impressed by this grandiose architecture? There's not a stone in the whole works that is not going to end up in a heap of rubble.

b) His confused disciples may have believed that by this he was referring to the so-called "Day of the Lord" ...

a future day when God would come down in judgment,

a day which had been proclaimed by prophets like Ezekiel, Joel & Amos

Indeed, it's language from those prophets (re. sun & moon failing, & stars falling from the skies) that Jesus quotes later in ch. 13

c) But when Jesus 1st tells them this enormous Temple will be reduced to rubble, their instinctive question is "When?" ... They press Jesus w/ two urgent questions:

"When are these things going to happen?" and

"What signs will we see that these things are coming?"

3. And then in typical Jesus-fashion, he gives them a non-answer ... he refuses to give them just the answer they're looking for

a) Jesus describes all kinds of distressing events that will come upon them: wars, famine, persecution, a strange & vague "desolating sacrilege" and the appearance of false prophets & false messiahs

b) These things might have been interpreted by his hearers as exactly the signs they were seeking ...

& indeed in the last 2K years scores of interpreters have tried to correlate these prophetic words of Jesus with particular wars & historical events in their own times,

Many have tried to use Jesus' words to pinpoint exactly when He would come again [blank PPT]

B. And that brings us back to us today, trying to make sense of these strange words of Jesus in Mark 13

1. How we interpret them depends on the basic assumptions we bring to the passage

a) If ambiguity and uncertainty in the Bible are a little threatening to you when you read it ...

if you are generally uncomfortable with ambiguity in the Bible, then in Mark 13 you will more likely look for the sign or signs that will unlock the secrets of the end times.

In that case, like many others before you, you would seek correlations in history or in current events to help you figure out more precisely when Jesus will return again

b) But what if the uncertain & ambiguous language of Mark 13 was actually meant to be ambiguous?

What if Jesus deliberately did NOT directly answer his disciples' request for a sign of when the end would come, including the great Temple being destroyed?

What if Jesus was telling them you can't know the timing, so don't ask for a sign?

2. This is in fact what I'm suggesting for how we should understand Mark 13, drawing from Anabaptist commentator Timothy Geddert (Mark, Believers Church Bible Commentary, © 2001 Herald Press, pp. 300-327)

a) In looking ahead to Christ's 2nd coming, the key verses for how we approach Mark 13 are vv. 32-33 (*read*)

b) Not even Jesus as he was speaking these words knew the exact timing of when God would bring about these end times events!

Text: 1 Cor. 1:7-9; Isa. 64:1-9; Mk. 13:24-37

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c) I believe that Mark left all these uncertainties there in the telling of this part of the Jesus story SO THAT we would not claim to know more than Jesus knew! (Geddert, p. 421)

3. For us to rightly hear these words of Mark 13 about the next Advent of Jesus, let's begin with two assumptions that I believe were Jesus' assumptions with his disciples:

Jesus' End Times assumptions in Mark 13

- *The timing of the End cannot be known.*
- *No sign will help to determine when the End comes.
(So don't expect any)*

a) The timing of the End cannot be known.

b) No sign will help to determine when the End comes. (So don't expect any)

V. If these become our assumptions about Christ's 2nd coming, (& if we're not supposed to be lining up the signs & creating timetables) then what does Mark 13 have to say to us in Advent today?

A. *In some ways, our key to understanding this whole apocalyptic chapter 13 lies in vv. 35 & 37 @ the end of it – "Keep awake!"*

1. Historically, the destruction of Herod's Temple, foretold by Jesus, actually did occur by the Romans some 40 years later, in 70 AD ...
2. and still, the glorious Son of Man did not return right after that, nor has he yet after almost 2K years full of wars & famines and earthquakes
3. Jesus told us that since we can't know exactly when he will return again, and since there will not be signs to help us figure out the timing, we can expect that Christ's return may be at any time ... tonight, or a thousand years from now
4. Our posture should not be trying to figure out timelines ... our posture should simply be disciplined readiness

Our Advent posture until
Jesus comes again:

Keep awake!

B. As we enter Advent, there are plenty of reasons around us to make us lose hope

1. Like the oppressed Jewish people in the days of the great prophets, like the disciples in Jesus' day under the Romans, we too need our hope renewed
 - a) We, too, long for God's dramatic intervention
 - b) We, too, need to keep awake until Christ comes back
2. That means we continue believing in and following the way of Jesus today!
 - a) It means we are alert & discerning, expecting Christ to return @ any time now
 - b) It means we're confessing & repenting of the sin in our lives & living in obedience to His word
 - c) It means we're trusting for guidance from the Spirit of God who continues to do saving work, even when it looks like evil is gaining the upper hand.

VI. Conclusion

A. When hope just seems like a pipe dream ... seems so hard to see & hard to grasp ...

1. Remember who it is we're waiting on ... who we're trusting ... on whom we're placing our feeble hope:
2. This is the God of the Bible: whose love prompted Him to do the impossible – to step out of the divine privilege of just being the Creator & instead take on the risks of vulnerable human flesh!

B. Let me leave you with a word of encouragement

1. One of the lectionary Scriptures for this 1st Sunday of Advent is a passage we did not emphasize today – 1 Corinthians 1:7-9
 - a) As I read it in The Message, I thought it was a perfect closing word of encouragement on a Sunday when we desperately long for hope ... at a time while we're expecting Christ to come again in final power
 - b) The fact that it follows so soon after our Fanning the Flames series on spiritual gifts makes it even more appropriate
2. Brothers & sisters, as we expectantly look for Christ to come again, I urge you to take this word to heart:

1 Corinthians 1:7-9 -- The Message

Just think—you don't need a thing, you've got it all! All God's gifts are right in front of you as you wait expectantly for our Master Jesus to arrive on the scene for the Finale.

1 Corinthians 1:7-9 -- The Message

And not only that, but God himself is right alongside to keep you steady and on track until things are all wrapped up by Jesus. God, who got you started in this spiritual adventure, shares with us the life of his Son and our Master Jesus.

1 Corinthians 1:7-9 -- The Message

He will never give up on you.
Never forget that.

(read)

Just think—you don't need a thing, you've got it all! All God's gifts are right in front of you as you wait expectantly for our Master Jesus to arrive on the scene for the Finale. And not only that, but God himself is right alongside to keep you steady and on track until things are all wrapped up by Jesus. God, who got you started in this spiritual adventure, shares with us the life of his Son and our Master Jesus. He will never give up on you. Never forget that.