# Sermon Note: Room, When Pressure Is Closing In
## First Sunday of Advent

### Introduction
This is the first week of *Sanctuary: Room for All*, our 2026 Advent and Christmas series. A sanctuary is, by definition, both a sacred place where we worship *and* a refuge where everyone is safe. God makes room for us in love and in grace so that we might make room for anyone and everyone else. And while the traditional scriptures for the Advent season include themes of suffering and endings, we begin Advent by lighting the candle of Hope.

We all experience a variety of pressures in our lives, whether that's from family or vocation or something else. This pressure can leave us wondering what comes next. In the selection from Isaiah, the people pray for God to come near amid their troubles. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus speaks to his disciples about a world in upheaval and compels them to *keep awake*.

### Illustration Video
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veySlNgGMO0
In this clip from *WALL-E* (2008), WALL-E starts his day on the roof of his truck, then heads to work with a cockroach and a cooler…

### Why This Video?
WALL-E works in a world filled with trash, items that have been discarded and forgotten, yet he still takes time to examine some of what he finds. The objects he chooses to keep suggest that usefulness and value can look different depending on our perspective. WALL-E's careful handling of a small plant suggests another kind of attention: living things need care. In a place filled with trash, WALL-E recognizes that he's found something both unexpected and special.

### Video Discussion Questions
1. Can you remember a time when you were under a lot of pressure? What helped you through it?
2. After WALL-E runs over the cockroach, he reverses and the cockroach pops back up. What do you notice about WALL-E's response? What do you think that moment suggests about the two of them?
3. WALL-E collects objects as he works. What do you notice about the things he chooses to keep? What do you think might interest him about them?
4. WALL-E throws away the diamond ring and keeps its case. Did you find his choice surprising or funny? Why do you think he did this? Have you ever found value in something another person discarded?
5. What do you notice about how WALL-E handles the plant and its leaves? What do you think the plant might mean to him?
6. Have you ever noticed something growing in an unexpected place? What was it? Where was it growing? What was it like to discover life in an unexpected place?

### Isaiah 64:1-9 (NRSVue)
[1]O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—

[2]as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

[3]When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down; the mountains quaked at your presence.
[4]From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.

[5]You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
[6]We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
[7]There is no one who calls on your name
or attempts to take hold of you,
for you have hidden your face from us
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

[8]Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
[9]Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

## Mark 13:24-37 (NRSVue)

[24]"But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
[25]and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

[26]"Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. [27]Then he will send out the angels and gather the elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

[28]"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. [29]So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. [30]Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. [31]Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

[32]"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father. [33]Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come. [34]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. [35]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, [36]or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. [37]And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

## Scripture Study Questions

1. Isaiah describes mountains quaking (64:1-3), and Jesus describes darkness and falling stars (Mark 13:24-25). How do you relate to these images? How do you sense God's presence in your life?
2. In Isaiah 64:5-7, the people confess their sin together. What do you think is the purpose of confession in worship? What do you feel when we say a prayer of confession each week in worship? What difference does confession make in your own prayers outside of church?
3. Isaiah describes God as the potter and the people as clay (64:8). In what ways has your relationship with God formed you? How are you different from five or ten years ago?
4. Isaiah closes with "we are all your people" (64:9). What might it look like to take those words seriously in our divided churches, community, and nation? What might need to change?
5. What signs does this selection from Mark imagine will indicate God's coming into the world? What signs have you read in other biblical texts?
6. Jesus asks his disciples to learn from the fig tree (Mark 13:28-29). What do you think might be important about its branches and leaves? What could Jesus be asking the disciples to look for?
7. Jesus says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (v31). Which of Jesus' words are most compelling to you? How do they guide you?
8. Jesus tells the disciples to keep awake, though they don't know when the time will come (vv32-37). What do you think this watchfulness means here? What do you watch for during the Advent season?

## Weekly Action

Ask God to open your eyes to scripture, then read Isaiah 64:1-9 or Mark 13:24-37. Consider reading it out loud. What stands out to you, what do you notice? What questions come to mind, and what do you think God might be saying to you in the passage? In the selection from Mark, Jesus ends by telling his disciples to keep awake. Each evening this week, write down one place you noticed God at work that day. At the end of the week, read your list and thank God out loud for one thing on it. Share what you noticed with a trusted spiritual partner, a loved one, or a small group.

## Prayer

Gracious and forgiving God, meet us in our frailty and forgive us our transgressions. We are grateful for your constancy in the midst of our divisions and conflicts. Speak the word to us that endures, so that we may share it in gratitude. Open our eyes and ears to your presence as we prepare to receive again your precious Son. Through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

*This content was developed by Rev. Bob Rhodes using source materials from Discipleship Ministries of The United Methodist Church, his own original writing, and AI tools in alignment with La Jolla UMC AI Usage Guidelines. AI assisted with drafting and iterative refinement. All final text was reviewed and approved by Rev. Rhodes. This series is adapted from Breakthrough, a worship series resource from the Eastern Pennsylvania and Greater New Jersey Annual Conferences.*