

First Sunday of Advent, Gospel Year A

IN CASE OF RAPTURE, PLANT A TREE

Matthew 24:36-44

First Sunday of Advent

Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

[Jesus said to the disciples,] 36 "About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39 and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41 Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. 42 Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."



DIAGNOSIS: Left Behind

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): What Does the World See?

The bumper sticker on the car ahead of me reads: "In case of rapture, this car will be empty." I guess the people in front of me want the world to know they are good with God. They are ready to meet Jesus on his return trip to earth. I prefer the bumper sticker written in response to the first: "In case of rapture, can I have your car?" That one fits me better—laughing in the face of such shows of public piety, dismissing the fantasy that Christ will return.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): What's Going on in the Heart?

But the truth is that neither the driver in front of me, nor I

myself, have any control over what God is up to. So we try to claim control—hedge our bets, each aiming for an outcome that will benefit each: One says piously, “I’m in.” The other says irreverently, “I’m indifferent.” (If I can’t control the outcome, then I can pretend I don’t care.)

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): God’s First Last Word

God cares. But not about the way each of us thinks things should go. God cares that we look everywhere except to God for our salvation. God cares that, in effect, we have pushed God out of the driver’s seat. And that’s not good for anyone—not us, and especially not our neighbor. So Jesus warns us to be ready: God is in charge of the outcome at that “unexpected hour.”



PROGNOSIS: Having God's Rapt Attention

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): God's Final Word

And the way God chooses to be in charge of that final hour, is by nailing our sins to Christ's cross, so we have no illusion that we can anticipate the rapture nor should we fear being left behind. Instead, God's Spirit turns our attention away from our choices, to what God desires: Peace through the cross and open tomb of Jesus. God says, in bumper sticker fashion, "In case of rapture, I've got this. Be ready for that! Love, God."

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): What's Going on in the Heart?

God says, "I've got this" through Jesus the Christ, and the too-certain-for-faith rapture expert falls to her knees, confessing: "In you alone I trust." God says, "Be ready for grace" to the

smug, self-protecting, irreverent Boomer, and that Boomer demurs, "Okay, God. Thanks for the reminder."

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): What Does the World See?

The new bumper sticker of the faithful says, "In case of rapture, plant a tree." After all, being ready for the God who comes in Christ doesn't involve us doing God's work, but our proper human work: Living. Living for the sake of God, and for the sake of the neighbor. So we feed the hungry, cloth the naked, tend to the wounded of the world, and we look up—knowing that the One who comes down, is the one who took on flesh and did the same. And more.