

First Sunday of Advent, Gospel Year C

Reading the Signs

Luke 21:25-36

First Sunday of Advent

Analysis by Chris Repp

[Jesus said:] 25“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. 26People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. 28Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

29Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; 30as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. 31So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. 32Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. 33Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

34“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, 35like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 36Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”



“Divine intervention is necessary at this point, for without it we are surely doomed. And that intervention comes in the person of the Son of Man. He comes to turn the world upside down.”

DIAGNOSIS: Fear

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Dismayed by Signs of Doom

There is a long history of reading apocalyptic passages as if they were intended for the ones reading them. So let's jump right in. There is, is there not, right at this moment, “distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves”? Sea levels are rising, and storms worsening. The existence of entire countries is threatened by human-induced warming of the planet. And while there is too much water in some places, there is too little in others. The nations of the world have just met to try to take action to reverse these distressing trends, or at least to slow them down.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Weighed Down

But we find that we are too weighed down by our extravagant lifestyles to take meaningful action. My dictionary defines dissipation as “squandering of money, energy, or resources.” At the turn of the millennium, 16 percent of the world’s population was using 80 percent of the available resources. That’s us “first-worlders” (with apologies to others who might be reading this). We can’t imagine living more simply or consuming less, so in spite of some progress, we are not at this moment ready to make the necessary sacrifices for the sake of our global neighbors or future generations.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Trapped

“It’s a trap!” warns Jesus. Our actions and our inactions, rooted in our sinful self-centeredness, have consequences, both for ourselves and others. If climate disaster is not itself the judgment of God upon us, that judgment surely awaits us.

PROGNOSIS: Anticipation



Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Set Free

Divine intervention is necessary at this point, for without it we are surely doomed. And that intervention comes in the person of the Son of Man. He comes to turn the world upside down (Luke 1:45ff) and set the prisoner free (Luke 2:68-79; 4:16-21). His death and resurrection, the “sign of Jonah” (Luke 11:29-30), lead to our forgiveness and repentance.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Standing Up

As a result of this intervention, we are no longer weighed down by the crises before us. Trusting that the Kingdom of God is near, we take heart, confident in our redemption. Now we regard the challenges of our time as opportunities to love and serve our neighbors, near and far, present and future.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Alert to Signs of the Kingdom

Do we expect Jesus to now return on the clouds and magically avert the looming disaster of climate change? Wouldn't that be nice! But no, I don't think that's how this works. If there is to be a solution to the crises we have created, it will be a solution that God works through us, leading us to love our neighbor and tend to the earthly garden, as God has intended from the creation of the world. That, we may anticipate, is what the signs are pointing to, what God's kingdom-come will look like.