

First Sunday in Advent

ANTICIPATING "THE END"

Luke 21:25-36

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Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

25There 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.

34Be 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."

DIAGNOSIS: The End of the World

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *The End Is Near!*

The disciples had earlier asked Jesus, “what will be the sign when this is about to take place?” (21:7), and Jesus had given a two-fold response. First, he described the imminent destruction of Jerusalem (21:12-24). Now he launches into a discourse on “the end of the end times” using vivid, foreboding apocalyptic imagery: “the power of the heavens will be shaken” (v. 26); “distress among nations” (v. 25); “roaring of the sea and the waves” (v. 25). It is true; just as Jesus presages, the “signs” we experience nowadays seem to be getting more and more ominous. Earthquakes, hurricanes, typhoons, fires, and tsunamis wipe out not just handfuls of people, but often hundreds of thousands. When we see so many people coming to such horrific ends, we fearfully wonder whether there’s anything that will prevent us from experiencing the same. That’s just the point, Jesus warns, the end will happen unexpectedly, “like a trap” (v. 35), and every creature is equally vulnerable!

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Oh, Woe Is Me!*

In response, our hearts clench up and we “faint with fear and with foreboding of what is coming” (v. 26). Sometimes we try to disguise our fear and distract ourselves with “dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life” (v. 34). Other times, we deny the inevitability of it all. Whatever our responses, they are indicative of fear-filled, despairing hearts.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *“The End Is Here!”*

The end will come suddenly, and when it does, Jesus says, it heralds a cosmic arrival: We will know it is “the end” when we see the Son of Man coming “in a cloud with power and great glory” (v. 27). Because the cloud (note the singular tense),

denotes the divine presence of Almighty God, this Son of Man wields divine authority. The big question when he arrives will be: will anyone “have strength” [King James translation is “be accounted worthy”] to “escape all these things” and “stand before the Son of Man” (v. 37)? In short, can any of us survive his reckoning, or will we “pass away” (be forcefully wiped out) along with the rest of heaven and earth?

PROGNOSIS: Surviving the End

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Stand-Up Survivor*

But wait! It turns out that the person speaking these words, Jesus, is none other than that very Son of Man himself who ushers in the Kingdom of God! And, lo and behold, he has already made an initial appearance, but ever-so-gently, as a baby swaddled in a manger (2:12). But more importantly, he has spoken words that will survive after his own death and consequently transform us: “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (9:22). These words disclose Jesus’ action plan, a plan about to become reality. The real surprise, however, comes in the reversal he will subject himself to: Jesus, the Son of Man, will become the victim of his own critique; Jesus will be accounted “unworthy”; Jesus will be condemned and “pass away” on a cross, Jesus will be buried. But the veracity of Jesus’ words will be revealed fully in one final action-one he had anticipated much earlier: He will walk out of his tomb Easter morning, alive and well, the first Survivor of the end, and a stand-up Savior for us.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Trusting the Great Survivor*

So, Jesus now explains, when he makes his cosmic appearance there is no need for fear. Instead, we are to stand up and

“raise [our] heads” (v. 28) with expectation, because the Kingdom of God is arriving in full force (v. 31). And, because that Kingdom depends on Jesus’ word—which will not pass away—we can trust that whatever circumstances may come, these events only announce the coming of the Kingdom (v. 31)! So we trust this first Survivor, and in him we find the stamina to “stand” at that final accounting.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Audaciously Anticipating the End*

Even though we cannot deduce an exact timetable from signs of the end, Son-of-Man trusters are confident that these signs are indicative not of God’s withdrawal, but rather of a happy reunion about to happen. Thus, when the signs manifest themselves, Jesus-trusters can be found busily assisting the distressed and distraught. Both our words and our actions can be heard above the din of disaster, and both will tell of the merciful Survivor Savior. This makes us co-implementers of Jesus’ other words, that at the end, “people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God” (13:29). Now that’s a reason for living!