

First Sunday in Advent, Year C, Gospel

THE END IS WHERE WE START FROM

Luke 21:25-36

First Sunday in Advent

Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

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: Advent: Beginning with the Ending

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Foreboding Endings

The First Sunday in Advent has a strange way of introducing us to a new Church Year. We start with a foreboding ending: signs of distress, events that strike fear, the cosmos shaken. It's not the sweetness and light that we'd prefer during this Season of Joy. But somehow it sounds all too familiar. Bad things happen—even in times when we are supposed to put on a smile and are mandated by the dominant Christian culture to wish everyone a "Merry Christmas"—whether it is or not.

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

Leave it to the declining mainline churches to make the subject for this Sunday the coming of the Son of Man in a cloud with power and great glory. No one wants a foreboding cosmic visitor; we want wintery lullabies and "no crying he makes"; we want a

visitor carrying a red velvet sack full of goodies—without the distress and judgment. So we keep our heads down, and hum “Away in a Manger” defiantly, while obediently shopping for Christmas gifts that are a mere distraction.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Judged and Conquered

Why would we need a Son of Man to come to judge our world, when it's so clearly already being destroyed by its own current afflictions—natural and human-imposed? And, as for the kingdom of God coming near? That sounds more like a threat than a promise: like a conquering army heading for your already-weakened fortress. Either way, it appears we're doomed.

PROGNOSIS: Ending with the Beginning

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Redemption Drawing

Near



But wait! Jesus says that all this anticipated calamity doesn't mark an ending, but a hope-filled beginning: "Stand up and raise your heads, for your redemption is drawing near." And, really, we shouldn't be surprised by his encouragement. After all, this news is spoken by the very One whom angels heralded to a has-been priest, a virgin, a righteous would-be husband, and a bunch of motley shepherds—people appropriately afraid when they found themselves in the radiant presence of archangels; people who thought it smarter to keep their heads down than to look into the face of the Almighty. But when they looked up, they found themselves in the company of One as humbly born as they. This One was their redemption drawing near. Nearer still was their redemption when this One hung from a cross, speaking words of forgiveness and paradise to those in his human likeness.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Heads Uplifted

So it is that we pitiful mainline churches, married to the

Revised Common Lectionary in this pre-Christmas season, a holiday month overshadowed by mandatory joy, find ourselves truly uplifted: Our redemption is near. As near as the font that we dip our fingers into. As near as the bread and wine we draw to our lips. As near as the “Come, Lord Jesus” that spills from our faith-filled Advent lips. The One humbly born amidst the clamor, will return—a Son of our humanity (a Son of Man), bringing God’s reign ever-nearer as we live by his promising redemption.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Promising New Beginnings

With raised heads we, the redeemed, have a clearer view of the world. It’s a world where bad things happen, and people are not always good. It’s a world where the need sometimes outweighs our ability to respond. And yet—and yet—we lift our heads, face the adversity and the pain, marvel at the stars, and see signs of summer in the wintery buds of the fig tree. Our redemption is at hand. And so we reach out with hands unclenched, and hearts less fearful. We are children of humanity, siblings to the Son of Man, who find our strength in God’s promise that though heaven and earth may pass away God’s words will not.