

First Sunday of Advent

CHRIST'S ADVENT: CATASTROPHE AVERTED

Matthew 24:36-44

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Analysis by Paul Jaster

36But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. 42Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43But 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. 44Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

DIAGNOSIS: Headed to Disaster, Living in the Moment

Step 1: Initial diagnosis (External Problem) : *Normally Preoccupied*

A common mantra of our culture is "live in the moment." We're on the train enjoying the scenery, the tasks and pleasures of each day. Jesus lists nothing bad, evil or immoral here. Just the normal every day stuff "totally on track" following the laws of

God and nature: eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, laboring in our field of work and attending to our daily domestic chores. It sounds like anybody's "to do list." Our normal preoccupations.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Dangerously Unaware

However, living in the moment without attention to God's coming to us in Christ leaves us dreadfully unaware of the danger we are in. For the God who created us will never settle for *carpe diem* (seize the day). God seeks *carpe Deum* ("seize God") by grabbing onto the coattails of God's grace. Failure to do so leaves us in a terrible situation "as in the days of Noah," when suddenly some perished while others were saved. Even being "on track" following the laws of God and nature still leaves us vulnerably in danger. For long ago that track was twisted and broken. And so now it is headed to a dead end. A day of judgment. When God has every right to say again what God first said in Gen 6:7, "I will blot out...the human beings I have created." Someone needs to throw a switch and get us on another track. Immersion solely in the everyday without attention to the last day leaves us dangerously unprepared for what can happen at any hour.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Cataclysmic Catastrophe

In just one word Jesus articulates the end result of living solely "in the moment." *Kataclysmos*! The typical translation, "flood," is much too wimpy. My basement floods. So what? It's just another item on the list. So let us use the much more jarring cognate "cataclysm." Life may seem like a daily "to do list" on the surface, but underneath are everlasting issues—what Frederick Dale Bruner calls "an endtime wipeout" and "no church picnic." Not only is the judgment of God sorely neglected in today's live-in-the-moment society, but it is neglected in

prominent Lutheran circles, too. A recent article articulating A Lutheran Christian Life for Today in a Lutheran churchwide magazine claims that “Jesus didn’t embrace threat as a way of inspiring new life” and “that Jesus consistently spoke in the language of promise, not threat—hope, not fear” and that “Lutheran Christians baptize to be part of something, not to escape some calamity.” Are you sure? Biblical texts like this one suggest that Jesus is bilingual. He speaks the language of both law and gospel, threat and promise. Cataclysm sure sounds like a calamity to me.

PROGNOSIS: On a Different Track, Living in the Maranatha Moment

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Surprising Coming*
Happily from the bilingual Jesus there is a promising word of good news: “Coming.” The coming of the “Son of Man” who is also “our Lord.” It is not just the “timing” of this coming that is so unexpected and surprising, but even more so the means and manner. Not a cataclysmic coming or judgment, but a cruciformed one. By God’s own self, no less, in Jesus Christ. In Bethlehem’s babe, God (“Lord,” adonai, YHWH) becomes a “Son of Man.” Son of us. One of us. Totally “on track” with us in the same precarious situation. And this God-made-flesh deals with the cataclysmic threat looming ahead of us, not by never mentioning it, but rather by climbing up a cross and confronting it head on. Embracing it. Suffering it. Dying it. And then overruling it. Jesus, like a thief in the night, robs death of its power by bursting through death in a glorious resurrection. A switch is thrown, placing us on another track, and creating a “new normal.” Jesus not only proclaims the good news. He delivers the goods. He is the good news. Jesus changes the situation.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Freeing/Refreshing Awakening*

Jesus awakens us to this new normal by speaking to us the gospel word, which invites us to believe that the most decisive coming (advent) of God has already happened in himself, Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord. And his life-giving Spirit enables us to act on this belief. Christian people “seize God” and grab on to that rainbow promise God first spoke to Noah and which now culminates in Christ. God’s great “never again.” “Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood” (Gen 9:11). We still do not know the “when”—the time of Christ’s return for a final sorting out of things. The timing and the manner of Christ’s return will surprise us, just as it did the first time. But we do know the “who.” The one who comes is the one who once already came...and who still comes today in word and sacraments...and in the least of these, our brothers and sisters. This relieves us of our fretting and worrying about the future. Instead, it frees us for the everyday. The moment. The present moment.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Watchful Readiness*
“Therefore YOU must be ready.” Jesus makes this “YOU” emphatically plural! While Christians wait for Christ’s return, they “gather” together out of all their separate occupations and preoccupations. They enter the “ark,” the nave, the church. And they are immersed in the saving flood of water and the word. And they wine and dine on the energizing meal of remembrance that “proclaims Christ’ death until he comes.” And they are married into Christ’s mission and ministry. Then from that gathering, they are “sent” back into the very world from which they came. Their field of work. The daily grind. They still live in the moment. But it is a missional and “Maranatha!” moment. The stuff of daily life is crossed over and connected with Christ’s coming (past, present, future). And our daily “to do list” becomes the joyful opportunity to fulfill our calling as Christ’s people. Advent waiting is never an idle twiddling of the thumbs. It is

an active, exciting waiting in normal everyday life. Expecting the unexpected. Crossing over and encountering Christ...in unexpected ways...at unexpected times...in unexpected places. Frederick Dale Bruner thinks it was blessed Martin Luther who once said, "Christians should live as if Jesus had died this morning, risen this afternoon, and was coming this evening" (The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28, p. 523). Dale and I have yet to find the precise location of that particular quote. But if Luther didn't say it, he certainly could have. For Luther lived in the moment. The maranatha moment. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus, come.