



In the film "First Reformed" Ethan Hawke (DEAD POETS SOCIETY, BOYHOOD, THE PURGE) plays a retired alcoholic military chaplain, Ernst Toller, whose son died in Iraq. His wife left him to struggle with his own conscience over their loss, and the maintenance as Reverend of the First Reformed Church in Upstate New York. A young couple who are strong environmental activists, come knocking at his door. Michael (Philip Ettinger) and his pregnant wife Mary (Amanda Seyfried) are struggling over whether or not to keep their baby. Michael thinks the world is too unfit for yet another child, and Mary sees it as their only hope. When Mary informs the Reverend of a suicide vest that Michael has constructed in their garage, the Reverend removes it from the garage, triggering Michael's suicide alone in the woods. Left with a testament and will to bury Michael, Toller posts Michael's question on the marquee outside of the church: "Will God forgive us for what we have done with his creation?"

Indeed, forgiveness is the question Reverend Toller cannot answer, no more than he can turn the apocalypse around in the religious context of the world. Writer/director, Paul Schrader (TAXI DRIVER, RAGING BULL, THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST) tackles yet another journey film that has its lost soul hero searching for a harbor in which to anchor his faith, and not finding it in this capitalist world, searches for a mission outside the law to set things right. The film offers no answers; just an abrupt ending, a blank black screen that is the darkness the Reverend describes earlier when consulting Michael. The same darkness that runaway slaves hid in beneath the church that used to be a hideout station on the Underground Railroad. In the end he finds refuge only in the arms of the suicide victim's pregnant wife, Mary, the one who held onto hope at all cost.

Paul Schrader, 71, began his long filmmaking career at the age of 24, abandoning his role as a film critic, to become a filmmaker. In most of his films, the protagonist is a ruined man, ruined by war (Taxi Driver), by sports (Raging Bull), by temptations defined by religions (Last Temptation of Christ). The search for a hard rain to clean up all the corruption comes in a war against social norms of a capitalist society, whether its guns hidden in the sleeve of Travis Bickle, Jake LaMotta's fists in the arena, or Christ's last visit with Mary Magdalene. In this film it's a suicide vest worn at the altar of our most sacred ground. It is "the battle between hope and despair" that never ends in the psyche of Reverend Toller, says Ethan Hawke, whose grand mother had set him on a track to become a priest at a young age, something he prayed he would never become. Hawke, the actor, says in this character there is no answer to this conflict, only the longest screen-time kiss he's ever had that closes the film.

While Hollywood spends time making content look extraordinarily good, Schrader has always spent time on how truthfully the content gets shown, and it's not always pretty. In one moment in this film, Mary introduces Toller to a game she and her husband used to play called "The Magical Mystery Tour." Completely clothed Toller lies down on his back; the pregnant Mary also clothed climbs on top of him seeking contact with every part of his body. Together they levitate off the floor, but instead of dancing over the lights of Hollywood as in La La Land, they glide as one body levitating over a scorched earth, as hope lifts them over and out of despair.