

Many years ago, I came across a book entitled *Unplug the Christmas Machine: a guide to creating a joyful, stress-free holiday season*. We used that book as a basis for an Advent retreat as there were lots of great questions that helped participants go deeper and determine for themselves what was most important to each about the season.

One of our human tendencies is to seek out ideals. The ideal job. The ideal relationship. Ideal home and holidays... And I suspect our longing for ideals is rooted in the desire to improve, to look for potential, a vision for how something could be better. And, as we know, this trait can easily turn aspiration into envy and devolve to grasping for an ideal that undermines the reality with which we've been blessed. And advertisers are good at exasperating this condition as they can lead us to see what we have and who we are as insufficient, unworthy, and unimportant.

Many read Mark's "little apocalypse" and other passages like it, as Jesus' predictions of the end. As I read it though, I think it can drive us back into the present with renewed energy to see the people and situations around us as gifts of God that we are called to love and care for.

There is no mention of the end of the world in this passage, no indication of final judgment, no call to flee the day-to-day realities and responsibilities of life, only the promise that "*the Son of Man is near*". Do you notice the key temporal markers of the parable that conclude the passage – *evening, midnight, cockcrow, and dawn*? Do they make you think of any other stories in Scripture? These times are identical to those in the passion story. And, much of what comes before – darkening of the sun, the powers being shaken, etc. correspond with key elements of the passion narrative. Mark isn't pointing us to a future apocalypse ("a revealing") but to a present one. Christ's death and resurrection change absolutely everything! Once Jesus suffers all that the world and empire and death have to throw at him...and is raised to new life...then nothing will ever be the same again. *Including our present lives and situations*.

At a previous parish, we use to joke about the Advent Police. Have you ever run into them? The church has long counseled keeping Advent as a season of active and vigilant preparation for Christmas, rather than a constant celebration of Christmas. It is good advice, yet too often, devolves into arguments about whether or not to sing Christmas carols, or pseudo-theological discussions about when to put a tree up in the church, or scolding sermons about remembering "the reason for the season." Perhaps, *our* preparing might be more about practicing seeing where God is entering into our lives in ways that align with God's coming in the vulnerability of the manger and the cross.

It will be key, first off, to recognize that God comes to us as we are. Not as the people we are trying to be or have promised to be, but the people we are. The families we are. The congregation we are. The nation and world that we are. Is there room for improvement in all these areas? Of course, but the best way to create energy to change is to receive God's blessing. Who we are just now (however imperfect) is still beloved of God.

Mark offers a distinctly apocalyptic view of not only Jesus but the Christian life. Not apocalyptic in the "end of the world" sense, but in the sense of pulling back the curtain of false hopes to reveal God's commitment to enter into and redeem our lives and world just as they are. Look around at the those near you – right here this morning, in your family, in your places of

work and volunteering – with new eyes. Use those eyes to see the people around you as gifts of God who, while imperfect as we are, are nevertheless meant to be loved and treasured just as God loves and treasures you.

We will likely be tempted at points this season to take various idealized portraits of our family or church or Christmas morning as the standard by which to judge our actual families and congregation and Christmas celebrations. (These comparisons are often the root of much of the heightened depression associated with the holidays) We can counter these temptations by committing to remind each other that God loves us as we are, accepts us as we are, and redeems us as we are. Yes, we have room for improvement. And at this exact same time, we are enough – totally and completely enough – and deserve love and respect now, as do those around us.

We begin the church year by looking ahead to the promise of Jesus’ “second” coming, and Mark helps us to recognize that Jesus comes into our lives in many and varied ways – *“about that day and hour no one knows”* – which corresponds to the first coming in the vulnerability of the manger and cross. It is an advent that continues to reveal the lie of so many false ideals we’ve bought into. At the same time, it is the Advent that spurs us to accept the people we are, while beckoning us forward in faith to become the people God has called us to be.

Rather than look back with nostalgia to the past or ahead to the end of time, I want to offer us a “present-tense Advent,” an Advent that directs our gaze to this very moment, imperfect yet beloved, fragile yet important, flawed yet beautiful, the very moment in which God chooses to meet, love, and redeem us. Here. Now. Right before our eyes.

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