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HERE-AND-NOW ADVENT

I like Norman Rockwell, but I sometimes think he is one of the most dangerous artists of the past century.

- That probably sounds odd, because Rockwell's art is very cheery, even sentimental.
  - His style led many to dismiss him as a serious artist, and often referred to him as merely an illustrator.
    - I love Norman Rockwell and his endearing style that portrays a bygone era.
    - Yet that is precisely why I think he is dangerous.
      - That sentimentality presents a great risk to our society when we view his images as ideal.
- Think of it this way: how many of us look at Rockwell's famous painting of a family gathered around a holiday table—presumably for Thanksgiving—and all are smiling and ready to dine on turkey.
- And somehow, we wonder why our family experiences don't quite measure up.
    - No arguing in this picture; no debate over recent politics; no sulking because a favorite dish has been omitted.
      - Simply family bliss.
      - Little wonder that our expectations don't measure up.

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Norman Rockwell, of course, is not the issue.

- The culprit is our tendency to seek out ideals in the first place.
  - The ideal job; the ideal relationship; the ideal childhood or marriage or home or holidays or more.
- I suspect longing for ideals is rooted in the desire to improve, to be always prepared to see greater potential—a vision for how something could be better.
  - Often those ideals are rooted in our own memories of how things were,
    - though, if we're honest, those memories are rarely completely accurate.
  - And this grasping for an ideal, now can easily turn aspirations into envy or disappointment.
    - It matters not how unrealistic that dream is;
      - the failure to achieve or attain it undermines the reality with which we have been blessed.
  - And that, I think, is the greatest danger of idealized pictures—whether painted by Rockwell, created by Madison Avenue advertisers, or generated in our own imaginations:
    - they lead us to see what we *do* have as insufficient, unworthy, and unimportant.

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All of this came to mind when I read Mark's "little apocalypse."

- Because while many read this passage and others like it as JESUS' prediction of the end,
  - I think instead 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.

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There are at least three kinds of apocalypses.

- By the way, the Greek word "apocalypse" literally means "uncovering" or "unveiling" or "disclosing."
  - A true apocalypse is about things being revealed for what they actually are.

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In the first kind of apocalypse, the world as we know it ends suddenly because of something catastrophic and unexpected.

- This understanding of apocalypse taps into a very specific human fear: that out of nowhere something could happen that would end life as we know it.
  - In the religious version, one group heads for a good place, and the rest of humanity goes to a bad place.
  - One more thing: in this version the end of the world or last times is seen as something that is out of our control.

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The second kind of apocalypse is one that we bring upon ourselves.

- This kind of apocalypse we can control, such as climate change.
  - We can change our ways, reform our habits, adopt new behaviors to put off or completely block the end.
    - And I think it's worth noting that many people have tremendous concern about the apocalypse we can't control and nowhere near enough concern for the one we can control.

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The third kind of apocalypse is about the revealing of JESUS as GOD'S anointed and true SAVIOR of the world.

- Note that there is no mention in this passage about the end of the world, no indications of final judgment, no call to flee from our day-to-day obligations and responsibilities.
  - There is only the promise that the SON OF MAN is coming and that HE is, in fact, near.
- In fact, Mark's clues of HIS coming—darkening of the sun, powers being shaken, angels, and so on—all correspond to the Passion narrative of CHRIST'S death and resurrection.
- Mark, in other words, isn't pointing us to a future apocalypse to be feared, but rather a present one that has been reshaped and revealed by JESUS' death and resurrection.
  - Because once JESUS suffers all that the world and empires and death have thrown at HIM...and is raised to new life...nothing will ever be the same again, including our present lives and situations.

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The Church has long observed Advent as a season of activity and vigilant preparation, rather than celebration of Christmas.

- That's a good practice, but too often that exercise devolves into arguments about whether or not to sing Christmas carols, or whether to put a tree up before Christmas, or scolding sermons about remembering the reason for the season (which I hope I have never done).
  - My counsel is that, rather than debating the line between our preparing and celebrating,
    - we might do well to practice seeing where GOD is entering into our lives,
    - and look for how we might align our lives more fully with GOD'S coming in the vulnerability of the manger and the cross.

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Central to that is recognizing 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 congregations we are; the communities we are; the nation and world we are.
  - Is there room for improvement in our lives? Of course.
    - But when did JESUS ever say, "I'll sit with you after you shape up and become worthy of GOD"?
    - GOD meets us where we're at, just as we are, without having to appear before GOD as perfect, Norman Rockwell people.

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Mark's Gospel, which we will hear much of in this new church year, is distinctly apocalyptic in that it pulls back the curtain of false hopes and realities in order to reveal GOD'S commitment to enter into and redeem our lives and world just as they are.

- Maybe we miss that.

But in biblical times gods were far off and cared little for people.

- They were to be feared and appeased.
- Everyone did their best to be good and pleasing to their gods and to earn their favor through offerings and personal sacrifice.

But this GOD is different.

- GOD came to a man called Abraham and promised to make him the father of a great nation whose purpose was to bless others.
  - Gods don't do that.
    - But this ONE did.
- GOD placed no requirements on Abraham, other than that he put his trust in GOD.
  - And Abraham did.
  - The whole story of the Bible is one of a GOD who comes to people as they are, to bless them, and to call them to bless others.
- And when we see the sun rising and the trees putting on leaves, we can be reminded of the promise of GOD'S blessing.
  - When we look around at those near us—in the church, in the family, in the neighborhood, in the places of work and volunteering—with new eyes lensed by the love of GOD in CHRIST JESUS—we see the blessings of GOD given to us.
    - These gifts of GOD who, while as imperfect as we, are nevertheless meant to be loved and treasured, just as GOD loves and treasures them.

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We might be tempted to look ahead at this season and times with our loved ones and envision idealized portraits of our family, or church, or Christmas celebrations as the standard by which to judge our lives.

- Such comparisons are likely to only lead to feelings of depression and inadequacy.
  - But just as we are not perfect, GOD has blessed us and surrounded us with others who are imperfect but are just as much in need of love and support as we are.

Rather than focusing our attention on our idealized hopes for Norman Rockwell celebrations, let us seek this year to have a “here-and-now Advent” that turns our gaze to the present moment,

- imperfect yet beloved, fragile yet important, flawed yet beautiful:
- the very time and moment in which GOD comes to us, to meet us, to redeem us, and to love us, just as we are.
  - And I believe that doing so will bring about an apocalypse, a revealing of who we are:
    - people blessed by GOD and called to be a blessing to others.
      - Here. Now. In this here-and-now Advent.