

CASSANDRA OR POLLYANNA?

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Psalm 22:25-31; Romans 8:22-28

***“...future generations will be told about the Lord,
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.”***
Psalm 22:30b

Half empty or half full. What do you think?

It's the question I posed to the children a few minutes ago. The old glass-half-empty or half-full thing is the classic distinction between a pessimist and an optimist.

So, which one are you?

In truth, we all spend time in both those worlds. There are advantages either way.

The experts tell us that optimists, on the whole, tend to be happier than pessimists. They also tend to enjoy better health. Optimists are more resilient: able to cope with setbacks as they come up.

On the other hand, optimists run certain risks. Gamblers who are optimists tend to lose more money than those who are pessimists. Optimists are also more likely to get into car accidents: they are, it seems, more likely to overestimate their own driving abilities.

Optimists also run the risk of staying in harmful situations longer than pessimists do; they're more likely to stick it out in that dead-end job or in that relationship that's going nowhere — because of their confidence that things will get better.¹

Literature provides us with some classic examples of optimists and pessimists.

The ancient Greek poet Homer gives us the prototypical pessimist. Her name is Cassandra, the daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy. The god Apollo endowed her with the ability to foretell the future, but along with that gift he also gave her a curse: that no one who heard her prophecies would believe her.

Cassandra is infamous as a prophet of doom. Again and again she warns her people of dire sufferings that will come upon them, but because they disbelieve her, she never has the satisfaction of knowing her words have had a beneficial effect.

I'm sure you know some Cassandras — people who are so caught up in a pessimistic worldview, there's little room for joy in their lives.

¹Arthur C. Brooks, "We need optimists," *New York Times*, July 25, 2015.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is another literary figure: from a far less exalted source. Pollyanna is the title character of a wildly popular series of children's books by Eleanor H. Porter. The first Pollyanna book was published in 1913 and is still in print. The series of Pollyanna stories came to be known as "Glad Books."

Pollyanna's a young girl who's ever cheerful and relentlessly positive in her outlook. No matter what misfortunes befall her, no matter what suffering descends upon people she loves, Pollyanna always looks for the silver lining in the storm cloud.

The Pollyanna books are largely forgotten today, but her name has become synonymous with wild-eyed optimism. People who always look to the bright side, come what may, are known as "Pollyannas."

The label's not entirely complimentary. Pollyannas are assumed to be a little unhinged. They're detached from the cold, hard facts of life. The "Pollyanna principle" is the determination to maintain a sunny outlook, despite all evidence to the contrary.

There's power in both viewpoints: pessimism and optimism. No one knew that better than President Ronald Reagan — the Great Communicator. When he

was running for president against the incumbent Jimmy Carter in 1980, Ronald Reagan discovered a question that had powerful resonance on the campaign trail: “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” Standing before the microphones, he asked it again and again. Reagan’s pessimism won him a resounding victory.

Once elected, though, President Reagan immediately changed gears. He became famous for his sunny optimism. But as a candidate, he knew that cultivating a relentless pessimism — and taking every opportunity to pin the evidence for that gloomy outlook on his opponent — was an express ticket to the Oval Office.

The Gipper’s question is still compelling: “Are we better off today than we were four years ago... or 10... or a generation?”

How are we to answer that question, as followers of Jesus Christ — as people who believe God’s in charge? Where is God leading the human race: on a march of progress, or a journey to disaster? Are we meant to be Polyannas or Cassandras?

As a starting-point to answering that question, I’d like to take a look at the psalm that provided our First Lesson today: Psalm 22. The section of the psalm we

read is sunny enough: **“From you comes my praise in the great congregation....The poor shall eat and be satisfied.... All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord.”**

The Psalm ends on a note of profound optimism, looking into the future: **“Future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.”**

But that’s not how the psalm begins. The first part of Psalm 22 is one of the darkest laments in all of scripture. Its opening line is the one Jesus himself spoke from the cross, in abject despair: **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”**

It gets worse. This afflicted soul’s **groan of lament proceeds onward through “I am a worm, and not human” through “my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast.”** Then follows the chillingly graphic line, “I can count all my bones.”

But then, abruptly, at verse 22 — just before today’s reading begins — the mood shifts. It’s a 180-degree turn, from lament to praise: **“I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.”**

So, what’s happened? What’s led to the psalm-writer’s abrupt change of

outlook?

Well, we're not sure, exactly, but in verse 24, the poet praises God who **“did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.”** This long-suffering soul does give the Lord points for being a good listener!

The next verse is where our passage begins, and from this point onward, it's full-bore optimism, until the triumphant conclusion in verse 30 and 31: **“Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it!”**

Psalm 22 ends on that resounding note of praise, that world-conquering note of confidence, but curiously, that's not how most people remember this psalm. They tend to begin and end with the first verse: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Maybe that's because it's a staple of Good Friday services. We tend to think of it as Jesus' cry of dereliction.

But was it? Consider who Jesus was. He was a learned rabbi. He knew the scriptures by heart. What makes us think he would have ended his recitation with verse 1? It's very possible he didn't stop there, reciting the entire poem from the cross. Just as modern hymns are often known by their first line, when the Gospel-writers quote that line of his — “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

— it could be a shorthand way of suggesting Jesus sang the whole thing, as blood dripped from his brow and flies circled his head. Wouldn't it mightily change many a Good Friday sermon to imagine the crucified Son of God turning that corner in his mind and heart, making the transition from God-forsakenness to praise?

With that in mind, let's return now to that campaign-rally question of Ronald Reagan: "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?" Our personal situations may lead each of us to answer that question in different ways, of course, but I'm especially interested in how we'd answer that question with respect to the whole human race. Are we Cannandras or Pollyannas when we answer it? Is the glass half empty or half full? Do we believe the world is becoming a better place, or is everything in a downward spiral?

Lots of people today would answer that question, "No." Each day's headlines are fairly dripping with bad news. The cascade of negative data threatens to overwhelm our fragile sense of well-being. After an hour or so of watching cable news, lots of us would say the "good old days" are looking better all the time.

But were they really? That's the question.

I think the news, as it's typically presented, distorts our perspective. It presents a false impression of reality. There's a reason for that: fear sells newspapers (or buys advertising time, if it's TV we're talking about).

There's a powerful evolutionary imperative that makes us gravitate toward fear-messages. Imagine the situation of our primitive ancestors. Which prehistoric person would be more likely to survive, upon catching a glimpse of a saber-toothed tiger? The one who said, "I don't want to trouble my mind with negative thinking today"; or the one whose fear produced a rush of adrenaline and caused him to grasp the haft of his spear more tightly?

The answer is obvious. The emotion of fear may not be comfortable, but it has a certain survival value. Several millennia later, you and I still tend to gravitate toward the bad news.

Contrary to fear-heightened public opinion, the human race is actually doing pretty well these days. That's the conclusion of a whole bunch of social scientists, who've applied objective criteria to the question of whether we're doing better today than we were yesterday.

This upbeat group has been tagged "The New Optimists." Taking a decidedly long view of history, they remind us that many aspects of the good old

days were not very good at all.

As the *Times* of London columnist Philip Collins noted at the end of 2016, we as a species have achieved some inspiring milestones in recent years: the proportion of the world's population living in extreme poverty fell below 10 percent for the first time; global carbon emissions failed to rise for the third year running; more than half the countries of the world had made the death penalty illegal; and giant pandas were no longer on the endangered species list.

A year later, New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof noted a few more benchmarks. What would you say, he asks, about the number of people across the globe living in extreme poverty — as defined as trying to live on less than two dollars a day? Multiple choice question: on any given day, what happens?

A) Does the number of people living in extreme poverty rise by 5,000, due to climate change, food shortages and political corruption.?

B) Does it stay about the same? Or,

C) Does the number of extremely poor people drop by 217,000? What do you think?

The correct answer is “C.” The human race is actually making strides on eliminating extreme poverty.

Kristof observes:

“For nearly all of human history, extreme poverty has been the default condition of our species, and now, on our watch, we are pretty much wiping it out. That’s a stunning transformation that I believe is the most important thing happening in the world today — whatever the news from Washington.”²

But do we hear of that progress on the cable news networks? Not very often.

Kristof followed up on that theme with a similar column a few weeks ago.

In addition to citing the figures about the daily decline in extreme poverty — which continued in 2017 — he points out that, **“every day, 325,000 more people gain access to electricity. And 300,000 more gain access to clean drinking water.”**

Again, he brings the figures home:

“As recently as the 1960s, a majority of humans had always been illiterate and lived in extreme poverty. Now fewer than 15 percent are illiterate, and fewer than 10 percent live in extreme poverty. In another 15 years, illiteracy and extreme poverty will be mostly gone. After thousands of generations, they are pretty much disappearing on our watch. Just since 1990, the lives of more than 100 million children have been saved by vaccinations, diarrhea treatment, breast-feeding promotion and other simple steps.”³

A Swedish historian by the name of Johan Norberg has examined 10

²Nicholas Kristof, “Why 2017 May Be the Best Year Ever,” *New York Times*, January 17, 2017.

³Nicholas Kristof, “Why 2017 Was the Best Year in Human History,” *New York Times*, January 6, 2018.

important indicators of human flourishing — food, sanitation, life expectancy, poverty, violence, the state of the environment, literacy, freedom, equality and the conditions of childhood. He concludes that the human race has seen improvement in all of them. A news story about Norberg paraphrases his findings in this way:

“It wasn’t so long ago that dogs gnawed at the abandoned corpses of plague victims in the streets of European cities. As recently as 1882, only 2 percent of homes in New York had running water; in 1900, worldwide life expectancy was a paltry 31.... Today, by contrast, it's 71 — and those extra decades involve far less suffering, too.”⁴

These are slow, incremental changes. They don’t make the headlines. But the numbers are real.

Our human minds, though — the greatest tool our Creator has given to us — conspire to mislead us. Because there’s survival value in fear, our minds jump to the fear-inducing story every time and pay scant attention to the comforting ones.

“Peace of mind,” writes the Franciscan teacher of spirituality Richard Rohr, “is actually an oxymoron. When you’re in your mind, you’re hardly ever at peace, and when you’re at peace, you’re never only in your mind.”

What he prescribes, instead, is to turn off the scrolling news feed at regular

⁴Oliver Burkeman, “Is the world really better than ever?” *The Guardian*, July 28, 2017.

intervals, and make time for prayer and contemplation. This actually grounds us more firmly in the truth of God's loving activity in the world than those endless "Ain't it awful" news stories.

Another way to put it is to observe that the human brain is like Velcro for the negative and Teflon for the positive. It helps to remind ourselves that, for evolutionary reasons, our negative thoughts are so much stickier than the positive ones.

So who's going to be the example we follow, as Christians? Cassandra or Pollyanna?

I think we do well, as followers of Jesus Christ, to locate ourselves somewhere between the two. It's important to be realistic in our assessment of our fallen world, with all its trouble and suffering. There's nothing to be gained, for example, by saying to a mother grieving the loss of her child, "Chin up, things will get better tomorrow." As the psalmist reminds us, there's an important place for songs of lament in the spiritual life.

But on the other hand, lament can be overdone. Christians who are too quick to condemn the bad things they see around them can be pigeonholed as people who deny the fundamental goodness of God's creation.

Psalm 22 can be our example. It offers us freedom to cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” in moments of suffering. But it also gives us the confidence to see things through — knowing that, if we persist in faith, we too will join that anonymous poet in praising the goodness of the Lord, and “proclaiming [God’s] deliverance to a people yet unborn.”

Let us pray.

**Truly, O God, you have the whole world in your hands:
and you have us in your hands.
Help us to believe more energetically,
to trust more fully,
and to hope more courageously,
knowing that the world in which we live is the world you love,
and that the one who went to the cross for us
is your son and our Lord. Amen.**

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