

“Pessimist or Optimist”

Psalm 22: 19-28

An optimist sees the best in the world, while a pessimist sees only the worst. An optimist finds the positive in the negative, while a pessimist can only find the negative in the positive.

For example, an avid duck hunter was in the market for a new bird dog. His search ended when he found a dog that could actually walk on water to retrieve a duck.

Shocked by his find, he was sure none of his friends would ever believe him. He decided to try to break the news to a friend of his, a pessimist by nature, and invited him to hunt with him and his new dog.

As they waited by the shore, a flock of ducks flew by. They fired, and a duck fell. The dog responded and jumped into the water. The dog, however, did not sink but instead walked across the water to retrieve the bird, never getting more than his paws wet.

This continued all day long. Every time a duck fell, the dog walked across the surface of the water to retrieve it.

The pessimist watched carefully, saw everything, but did not say a single word.

On the drive home the hunter asked his friend, "Did you notice anything unusual about my new dog?"

"I sure did," the pessimist said. "Your dog can't swim!"

These days, finding reasons for pessimism is pretty easy. Based on a random collection of newspaper headlines and screaming warnings culled from social media, it seems like a no-brainer. It's a lot harder to assemble a list of reasons for optimism -- at least from those sources.

But that's only because so many reporters are working overtime to be pessimistic. Fear sells newspapers.

A growing number of experts, though, are taking the opposite view: that the times we're living in are by no means the worst of times. Considering the most important criteria for human well-being, they may even be the best.

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 good at all.

At the end of 2016, *The Times* of London columnist Philip Collins noted some inspiring milestones recently achieved: 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 few weeks later, *The New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof boldly named 2016 "the best year in the history of humanity." Kristof cited declines in global inequality, a child mortality rate roughly half what it had been in 1990, and 300,000 more people gaining access to electricity every day.

Yet, most news consumers are unaware of these positive developments, which are the product of slow, incremental changes.

Positive stories like these are not the stuff of which headlines are made. The war in Ukraine, a hundred-thousand refugees coming to America, high inflation, weather disasters and mass shootings – get far more attention.

As we look forward to the post-pandemic recovery, once again we're being tugged between the optimists, who highlight all the diseases that may soon be beaten through new vaccines, and the pessimists, who warn that humanity will never win the evolutionary arms race against microbes. But this represents a false choice. History provides us with powerful examples of people who were brutally honest in identifying a crisis but were equally active in seeking solutions.

Writing in *The Guardian*, Oliver Burkeman observes that the New Optimists believe that "our prevailing mood of despair is irrational, and frankly a bit self-indulgent.

They argue that it says more about us than it does about how things really are – "illustrating a certain tendency toward collective self-flagellation, and an unwillingness to believe in the power of human ingenuity." The gloomy view is, he points out, an ancient survival mechanism programmed into the human race: "The cave-dweller who always assumed there was a lion behind the next rock would usually be wrong -- but he'd be much more likely to survive and reproduce than one who always assumed the opposite."

"Peace of mind," writes 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." Obsessive consumers of news stories -- whether gathered from traditional media sources or from endless, scrolling social-media feeds -- dwell in their own minds constantly. "The Early Christian *abbas* (fathers) and *ammās* (mothers) knew this," says Rohr. They "first insisted on finding the inner rest and quiet necessary to tame the obsessive mind. Their method was first called the prayer of quiet and eventually was referred to as contemplation."

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.

In order to overcome the drag of pessimistic obsession with "the good old days," a fundamental change in perspective is necessary. That sort of 180-degree turn toward fact-based optimism is not really new -- despite the "New Optimists" label. We can see it even in Scripture, in what is perhaps the most well known of all biblical laments, Psalm 22.

It's hard to imagine a bigger about-face than what we see in Psalm 22. This psalm of lament -- which was, of course, the song Jesus himself quoted as an expression of his agony on the cross -- begins in abject despair: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

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," to the stunningly graphic, "I can count all my bones."

But then, abruptly, at verse 22 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."

The reason becomes clear in verse 24, as the poet praises God who "did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him." After all his tribulations, this long-suffering soul awards the Lord points for being a good listener.

So confident is the psalmist in God's reliability -- despite it all -- that he offers praises on behalf of those who will come after him:

"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!" (vv. 30-31).

For all its gruesome imagery, Psalm 22 is extremely well-known. Perhaps that's because this psalm is a staple of Good Friday services. No doubt, the part with the greatest resonance is the "Why have you forsaken me?" opener. It's the psalm's somber first half our people are more likely to know. Curiously, the concluding shout of praise -- despite its world-conquering confidence -- has far less staying power for most readers.

Amid the turmoil of life, we too often find ourselves alternating between the positive and the negative. Life's struggles may lay us low for a time, but upon further prayer and reflection we discover deeper levels of devotion. These make room for more ambiguity than the simple, childlike "God will take care of you" faith many of us were taught.

The apostle Paul captures a deeper faith in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."

These two opposite poles of spirituality are symbolized by two prophetic figures from the world of literature: Cassandra and Pollyanna.

The ancient Greek poet Homer gives us the figure of Cassandra, 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.

We all know Cassandras -- people who are so caught up in a pessimistic worldview that there's little room for joy in their lives.

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

Pollyanna is a young girl who's ever cheerful and relentlessly positive in her outlook on the world. 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 very name Pollyanna has become synonymous with wild-eyed optimism. People who always look to the bright side, even amid the most fearsome darkness, are labeled "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.

We do well, as followers of Jesus Christ, to locate ourselves somewhere between Cassandra and Pollyanna. 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.

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.

We need to find the proper balance. Psalm 22 -- the whole of the psalm, from "Why have you forsaken me?" to "proclaim [the Lord's] deliverance to a people yet unborn" -- serves as a practical guide to achieving that balance.

May the peace of God . . .

#793 – Be Thou My Vision