

I wonder if you see yourself as a pessimist or an optimist? Is the glass of life half empty, or half full? My friend and I have gone back and forth about this a bit over the years. He's wildly optimistic about most things, and sometimes I would say his optimism, his hopefulness borders on the irrational. If the weather forecast says there's a 70% chance of a snowstorm coming, he will focus very seriously on that 30% chance that it is going to be a nice day after all. I, meanwhile, will begin adjusting my travel plans and making a backup plan for the day. My friend says I'm a pessimist, but I would argue that I'm simply a realist, trying to prepare for the thing that is most likely to happen, whether I like that thing or not. My friend, however, says he doesn't want to be disappointed twice, both by thinking something bad is going to happen, and then by having the bad thing actually happen. He'd rather be hopeful, and enjoy his state of hopefulness, even if it doesn't work out that way later on. How about you? Pessimist? Optimist? Realist? Are you a hopeful person?

This week, I've thinking a lot about the Majesty of God coming into the world, and also about hope, and what it means to be hopeful in this season of Advent. The text from Mark's Gospel tells us that the world was waiting, longing, pining for something, as it sat mired in sin and error. Perhaps you can relate to that feeling – when you know that your life is off track, when you know you're going in the wrong direction, when you know that you aren't living either as you or as God wants you to live, when you know that life seems unfulfilling – you don't relish staying where you are. You are longing, hoping, pining for some way to get out of the pit. This is the state of the whole world, waiting on God-in-the-flesh in Jesus Christ. And then – a thrill of hope. We're weary, but rejoicing: morning is breaking, and light is canceling out the darkness. Advent is a season of hope. But I believe we're called to something more than a passive hope, something more than a vague feeling, as we sit at the bottom of that pit, that something better might come along eventually. So what kind of hope are we meant to cultivate in this season?

Let's look at our gospel text for today. Mark's gospel sometimes seems like a surprising place to start when we're beginning Advent. After all, we know that at Christmas, we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, but when Mark begins, he skips any mention of how Jesus is born, and jumps straight to Jesus as a thirty-year old, embarking on the beginning of his ministry. Matthew and Luke are the gospels that treat us to the stories of angels and shepherds and Wise Men and mangers that we love, and even John's gospel, with its image of a light in the darkness feels appropriately like a Christmas story. But Mark gives us

nothing more than this at the start of his gospel: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Boom. And he’s off and running.

But I love it. I love Mark’s gospel. He is so intent on making sure you know about Jesus and the good news Jesus brings that he can’t slow down long enough to give us more than what he considers the essentials. And Mark isn’t so much concerned with how Jesus was born as he is with the fact that Jesus is here, and we need to be ready, and we might want to do some self-reflection and some changing of our lives, changing our heart and minds because of Jesus’s presence.

So, as Mark opens his gospel, he centres us in words from Isaiah: God is sending a messenger who will prepare the way for the messiah, the voice of one who crying out in the wilderness, calling us to “Prepare the way of the Lord” and “Make straight” a path for God in the world. These may not be nativity words, but they are definitely Advent words. Prepare. Get ready. Someone is coming and we need to get ready.

John the Baptiser appears in the wilderness, calling people to repent, so that their sins might be forgiven. To repent means to change the direction of your life, to change the direction of your heart and mind, to get off the wrong-way road you were traveling on, and turn back to God. John tells people to do this – to repent – and they do. Mark says that people “from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem” were coming to John, confessing their sins. John tells them: someone else is coming, and I’m just his servant. I’ve baptized you, cleansed you with water. He will cleanse you by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

John the Baptizer tells the people to get ready, help is on the way, and the people respond by getting to work at once, so that they are ready for this arrival of this hopeful good news that is coming. They’re repenting. Confessing. Being cleansed in baptismal waters. When Jesus arrives, they want to be ready for what is next, ready to live into the hope that John has given them.

How about you? Are you a hopeful person? What are you hoping for this season? How are you longing, pining for God to be at work in your life right now? And what are you doing because of that hope? Mark describes a whole people filled with expectation about this one that John was describing to them, but they didn’t just listen to John’s words and sit passively, waiting for Jesus to show up. They were filled with hope, and so they got busy. They were filled with hope, and so they started repenting now, not waiting for Jesus to arrive. They were hopeful, and so they let John cleanse their spirits as they confessed

their sins, so that they would be ready to do whatever Jesus wanted them to do. They were full of hope, and their hope led them to act, because they had faith that their hope in God would not disappoint them.

This Advent, I'm hopeful – even if I still expect snow when the forecast tells me it is likely! I'm hopeful that Christ is continually born into our midst, continually reminding us that God is with us. I'm hopeful enough that I want to prepare my life, my heart again. Hopeful enough that I want to make sure that I'm going in God's direction, not the wrong direction. And hopeful enough that instead of waiting passively, I'm going to wait actively, working to carry out the good news right now, because my hope is built on faith in God's promises, which never disappoint us. We're waiting, yes. But with a thrill of hope in our hearts, let's get to work while we wait. Amen.