

Coming, Ready or Not: The Character of Advent Hope

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Some while ago I got on a train from London to Yorkshire. It was a good opportunity to see family and, given the self-absorption of central London, to check that the rest of the country was still out there. But the real reason I went was to have a chance to see my friend. We've known each other 40 years and seen each other at least once a year all that time, even during the season I lived in North Carolina. He's one of the most dynamic people I know—mountain climber, high school head of department, jazz pianist, poet.

But the last 20 years have been different. He's been struggling with a debilitating post-viral fatigue syndrome. He had to give up work. For much of those years he's largely been housebound.

I was really looking forward to seeing him and comparing notes. But just as I set foot on the train, I got a text that said, "I'm sorry, I feel I'm letting you down, but I can't see you tomorrow. I've been sleeping till lunchtime every day, and I haven't got energy to share even a short conversation." I still went to Yorkshire, and saw a bit more family than expected, but I had a big hole in my heart all weekend.

I got up to Yorkshire to see him a few months later. That's not the point. The point is, this man is 55 years old and he's had the heart and soul torn out of his life these last 20 years, and there's no upward curve. Right now he's so weighed down he can't even see an old friend for a half-hour chat. What can we say in the face of this long imprisonment? What do we believe? What sense can we make of it all? I say *we* because it feels like all these last 20 years, he and I have struggled together to put some meaning around his experience, and what truth we've found has come through his courage, his honesty, and his willingness to share hope and despair.

I share his story because it feels like the whole world has had post-viral fatigue syndrome. Long-planned festivals dismantled, hard-earned projects destroyed, life plans ruined, sickness abiding, regular life perpetually postponed. It's hard to get your head round what's happened to the world. If it popped up in Isaiah or Jeremiah, it would be a forewarning of the disaster to come with the climate catastrophe—a way to teach us that we can't save ourselves, we sink or swim together. But we're not in Isaiah or Jeremiah right now, and the extent and dimensions of the pandemic are tough to comprehend. So what I'm offering here is a small way to imagine a bigger set of issues. It's what the rhetoricians call *synecdoche*—where one small part becomes a token of a much bigger whole.

When I returned to London from my weekend in Yorkshire, I picked up the phone to compare notes with my friend and share sadness and the multiple ironies of life. I share now what we discussed then. It could be you can identify with what he's been going through—whether because it resembles your long covid, or your experience of the pandemic, or some other intractable facet of your life experience. The search I'm engaged in is, where we find Advent hope.

The hardest thing of all to say, and the word I still hesitate to utter, ten years on, is, "I wonder if this illness will ever end. Do you think you'll be like this—weak, often

housebound, sometimes bedridden—for the rest of your life—maybe another 35 years?” Occasionally I do have the courage to say those fearful words. And he has the grace to say “Yes, I do often wonder this.” He says it in such a beautiful way that makes me feel better for naming it and tells me he’s glad to have someone in his life who isn’t constantly pointing him to miracle websites or telling him about a cousin or a friend at work who had something similar and experienced an amazing cure. Someone who can call it what it is.

You can’t discover hope until you’ve at least glimpsed despair. Hope is not to be trivialised. It’s not positivity or optimism. Hope is eschatological, not teleological. The difference is this: teleology works from now to the future; it asks what actions now best accord with the final goal we’re working towards or the ultimate purpose we were created for. It stretches the present into the future. Eschatology works from the future to now. It brings the future into the present. It regards the future as more real than the present and evaluates all present actions to the degree they accord with the future that will come to the present. Teleology is anthropological—it’s something humans do. Eschatology is theological—it’s something God does.

Advent hope is eschatological. Wherever we’re going, however far away it seems or impossible it is to get there, Jesus is coming to meet us. No one ever gets to finish their own story. Civilisation never gets to a place of completeness. Jesus will come to meet us before we’ve finished. Jesus says, “Coming, ready or not.” And it turns out, we’re never ready. My friend isn’t ready. But the truth is, he’s no less ready than I am.

In the kingdom of God, nothing bad lasts forever. It may be terrible; it may last a long time. But in the kingdom of God, nothing bad lasts forever. Or to put it another way, for Christians, the future is always bigger than the past. However much we suffer, however much we hurt, however much we regret, God will always be able to take our fragility, our failure, our foolishness, our grief, our bitterness, and our sorrow, and gather it into the kingdom. The past is limited; the future is eternal. The past is flawed; the future is beyond bounds. For Christians, the future is always bigger than the past.

So yes, it *is* possible to say “I wonder if this illness will ever end.” And it is *also* possible to say, without being trite or superficial, “I know it will end. It may last for the rest of your life—but it won’t last forever.” Everything that is incomplete or unfulfilled in your life Christ will meet and transform and gather into the kingdom. Nothing is irredeemable. That’s the Advent hope.

And because of this Advent hope, we can have the courage to go to the very bottom of the pond and name our worst fear and speak it out loud. When the Archbishop’s envoy to the Middle East, Terry Waite, was taken prisoner in Beirut in 1987, for what turned out to be four years of mostly solitary confinement, he immediately realized how serious the situation was. He made three resolutions: “No regrets. No self-pity. No false sentimentality.” In other words, don’t dwell on how the past could have been different, don’t tell a false story of the present that makes it all about you, and don’t take refuge in a fantasy about the future. Those convictions got him through four years in captivity. They’re a pretty good guide for life. They certainly constitute a pretty good motto for my friend struggling with a debilitating sickness. Because regrets, self-pity, and sentimentality are all methods of dwelling on ways things might be different from how they are. They’re all inhibitors to facing the reality before us.

They're all forms of lack of faith in the promise of Advent—that however bad things are, Christ is coming, and so we can face it.

Terry Waite's resolutions are not a million miles away from ancient Stoicism. The former slave Epictetus said it's not what happens to you that counts, but how you respond to what happens. So long as we focus on keeping control of our reactions, he said, we're free. Nothing, not even a pandemic or four years as a hostage, can defeat us. It's a wise approach, and a lot of Christians say if they weren't believers, they'd be Stoics, because Stoicism teaches you to stop criticising, blaming, and accusing others, and look inside yourself to find peace. Terry Waite's motto can be our guide when we get from the hospital the test results we most fear, when we hear on the telephone the news we deeply dread, when we discover a message that confirms what we're most scared to admit. No regrets. No self-pity. No false sentimentality.

But there's one thing missing from Stoicism, and that's the quality Paul highlights when he faces his own lockdown. Writing from prison, Paul lists no fewer than 17 forms of trial: hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword, death, life, angels, rulers, things present, things to come, powers, height, depth, and finally anything else in all creation. Paul uses this comprehensive list to say "Nothing whatsoever can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus."

Many of us in the face of the pandemic have just felt powerless. Unlike a Stoic, Paul embraces that fragility. He accepts he's going to be overwhelmed sometimes. So instead of making himself impervious to adversity, Paul invests in relationship. He decides that the heart of the universe is connection with God and one another. He spends his lockdown pondering the one relationship that's more enduring than all the others. He turns from a teleological to an eschatological mindset. He's not a Stoic with a stiff upper lip, nor is he taking refuge in a fantasy world of make believe. Paul believes Advent saves us in the real world of betrayal and loss and anger and hurt. It's only because of Advent hope that he and we find the strength to name and face how bad our situation really is.

James Stockdale was a commander and pilot in the US Navy during the Vietnam War. He was a prisoner of war for seven years. During that time he was regularly kept in solitary confinement, tortured, and beaten. Later he talked about the difference between him and some of the other American captives who experienced the same cruelty at the hands of the North Vietnamese guards and died in the prison camp. Those prisoners, he said, were optimists. They looked on the bright side of life. They said, "Christmas: we'll be out by then." And when it wasn't so, they simply said, "Easter: we'll be out by then." They died of a broken heart. What Stockdale's pointing to is the difference between hope and optimism. Optimism looks at the facts and chooses to put a positive spin on them. Advent hope recognizes how bad things really are but knows God is always bigger.

But Stockdale said another thing that goes even further: "I never lost faith in the end of the story; I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade." That's the crucial dimension of Advent hope. That this experience I'm going through, far from something I seek to suppress or erase or delete or forget, will come to be the defining experience of my life which, when I look back, I would not have had any other way. I wouldn't have the temerity to suggest such a thing if it were not a man like James Stockdale, and a person of daily cour-

age like my friend, who had first said these words to me. In the words of Psalm 84, “Blessed is the one who, going through the vale of misery, use it for a well.” That’s the wonder of what we’re talking about: “Who going through the vale of misery, *use it for a well.*” This isn’t a motivational slogan that says “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” It’s not a triumph of positive thinking. This is the message of the cross shining through the window of Advent hope. Christians wear a cross around their neck or pray before a representation of the crucified Lord because God has turned the death of Christ, that most ghastly incident of world history, into the defining moment of our lives that we would not trade. Because of the cross we can name suffering for what it is and know it won’t have the last word. And if God found a way to make even the cross part of the story of salvation, then we know that our grief and loss and sadness can find a place in the story too.

And that brings us to the last part of my conversation with my friend. How do you live in the present in a way that demonstrates your faith that your suffering will come to an end, your honesty about how bad things really are, and your hope that this experience will one day become the defining event of your life, which, in retrospect, you would not trade? By keeping to this principle: “If it can’t be happy, make it beautiful.” My friend’s life isn’t happy, and hasn’t been these last 20 years. But he has found ways nonetheless to make it beautiful.

Not long ago he sent me a couple of small paintings he’d done of mountain views from walks we’d done together many years ago. Those pictures made me cry, because I could only imagine how long it had taken him to paint them, I could vividly recall what an energetic and inspiring mountain companion he’d been, and I could only wonder whether we’d ever stand on a mountain together and behold such views again. But somehow those pictures became a sacrament of his faith and mine that this was not the end of the story and that God has prepared for us such good things as pass our understanding.

So this is the creed that my friend and I have pieced together from the fragments of his fragile existence and the insights of our distant communication these last ten years. This suffering will end. Because you know it will end, you can say how bad it is right now and name your worst fears. If you can’t succeed in projects, you can still invest in relationships. One day you will look back and regard this time as the defining season of your life, which you would not trade, and use it for a well. In the meantime, since it can’t be happy, make it beautiful.

Let me briefly assess how those five convictions map from a personal experience of chronic illness onto the global phenomenon of the pandemic. This suffering will end. At the time of writing, the pandemic could still go in several different directions. It could subside, with few if any further variants and gradual availability and take-up of vaccines across the world. It could by contrast flare up again, with virulent variants immune to current vaccines. And between those two extremes there are assorted degrees of anxiety. Whichever comes to pass, it remains true: this suffering will end. There may be other global perils, of which climate change presents itself as the most likely. But this suffering will end.

Because you know this suffering will end, you can say how bad it is right now and name your worst fears. Again, at the time of writing, I have heard few if any people, whether mighty and knowledgeable or humble and vulnerable, name the lurking fear that the pandemic may continue for many years—or that it may be the first

of a number of such pandemics. There is plenty of experience of “long covid”—but again, few people are prepared to articulate that the condition could last years or decades, like post-viral fatigue. This second conviction, like the first, seems apt for the pandemic.

If you can’t succeed in projects, you can still invest in relationships. This seems even more pertinent than the first two convictions. The pandemic has stymied many projects and initiatives, and generated an almost universal air of dissatisfaction and frustration. But it has, for many, created time to cultivate relationships and highlighted new technological ways of doing so. It would be an interesting exercise to ask members of a congregation to reflect on which of their relationships have grown and deepened since February 2020, and which have struggled and become more fragile. A third question might be whether relationships developed in one medium during the pandemic will or might blossom through other channels—perhaps in person—thereafter.

One day you will look back and regard this time as the defining season of your life, which you would not trade, and use it for a well. This is perhaps the most significant conviction of the five. It would be hard to imagine anyone easily forgetting the coronavirus pandemic. But how many would say it has been the defining moment of their lives? And how many would say this has been an experience they would not trade? In my book *Love Mercy: The Twelve Steps of Forgiveness* (Norwich: Canterbury 2020), I argue that this constitutes the key difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. For a true reconciliation, the parties recognize that they have found a quality of relationship they would not have had but for the serious breach that brought about their estrangement. That’s unusual, which is why forgiveness, while often extremely difficult and sometimes out of reach, is nonetheless more common than, and a necessary precursor to, reconciliation. The pandemic has been ghastly in many respects, but there’s no question it has revealed profound truths, globally and personally – and many will indeed be able to say afterwards that it was a defining moment—and even that it’s one they would not trade. It’s a huge statement, but it’s what Christians say about Jesus’ crucifixion.

Finally, in the meantime, since it can’t be happy, make it beautiful. In the 24 hours prior to writing this article, I’ve had two people thank me for offering them this counsel—one caring for a relative with dementia, the other facing the loss of her spouse. It’s not designed to be saccharine greetings-card faux wisdom; it’s intended to divert energy from where it does no good to where it may be more fruitful and rewarding. In eschatological context, it’s what I call living God’s future now—embodying today the restoration of the last day. It’s been my counsel to many in pastoral need, and to a great many through the pandemic. It is, I believe, an Advent sentiment.

This then is Advent. This is the Advent hope. This is what it means to live the future in the present, whether in a time of chronic illness or in a global pandemic. We’ll never be ready, and some of us are in a real mess. But here’s the good news: Christ is coming anyway.