

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-