

Then, abruptly, the psalmist switches character and gives us higher-highs than we would expect: *"You who fear the LORD, praise him!"* (v. 23) and *"From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear God"* (v. 25) and *"All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all families of the nations shall worship before God"* (v. 27) and finally, *"Posterity will serve God; future generations will be told about the LORD, and proclaim God's deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that God has done it"* (vv. 30-31).

What's going on here? Why the flip-flopping? What's the Psalmist really saying? Is the Psalmist being a Cassandra or is he really a Pollyanna? For those unfamiliar with Cassandra and Pollyanna, let me enlighten you! The ancient Greek poet Homer gives us the figure of Cassandra, daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy. The god Apollo, enamored with Cassandra, wooed her by giving Cassandra the ability to foretell the future; but when Cassandra spurned Apollo's advances, the god cursed her: no one who heard Cassandra's prophecies would believe her.

Cassandra is infamous as a prophet of doom, the preeminent pessimist, a real downer. Again, and again she warns her people of the terrible things that will happen to them. Cassandra forecasted the kidnapping of Helen of Sparta by Paris of Troy, which sparked the Trojan War (the war with the trick horse), which led to the death of King Priam and his sons, the fall of Troy and the death of the demigod Achilles. Cassandra warned her people, but because they did not believe her. Tragically, Cassandra even predicted her own fate: enslaved by King Agamemnon of Greece, she becomes his lover and bears him two children before being killed by Agamemnon's jealous queen, Clytemnestra. Whew! Heavy stuff. But we all know Cassandras: people who are so caught up in a pessimistic worldview that there's little room left for joy in their lives.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is Pollyanna, the heroine from Eleanor H. Porter's wildly popular children's books. Pollyanna is ever cheerful, with a relentlessly positive outlook on life. No matter what misfortunes befall her, no matter what suffering descends upon the people she loves, Pollyanna always looks for the silver lining in the storm cloud.

Today, the very name "Pollyanna" is synonymous with unbridled optimism. People who always look on the bright side, even amid the most fearsome darkness, are labeled "Pollyannas." Which is not entirely complimentary, because Pollyannas are assumed to be tremendously naive and maybe even unhinged, detached from the cold, hard facts of life

because of their determination to maintain a sunny outlook in the face of the world's ugliness and darkness.

So, is the Psalmist a Cassandra or a Pollyanna? I suspect, like each one of us, he endured days when Cassandra raised her dreary head, and he enjoyed other days when Pollyanna shined brightly. I suspect, too, that most days the psalmist lived somewhere in between Cassandra and Pollyanna.

Which is where we, as disciples of Jesus, need to locate ourselves. It is important to be realistic in our assessment of our fallen world, with all its trouble and suffering. Hunger and homelessness exist. The weak are exploited by the powerful. War and disease displace millions from their homes. The world is undeniably messed-up most days, and so we might be excused for letting our inner Cassandras surface.

But lament can be overdone. Christians who are too quick to condemn the bad things they see around them may be pigeonholed as people who deny the fundamental goodness of God and God's creation. Every Cassandra needs to be tempered by a little Pollyanna perspective, and every Pollyanna needs a healthy dose of Cassandra to stay grounded. We need to strike a proper balance. Psalm 22 – the *whole* 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 this balance.

What makes the difference, for the psalmist and for us, is hope; not just any hope but hope in God. In verse 24, the psalmist praises God who *"did not hide God's face from me, but heard when I cried to God."* 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 faithfulness, despite the hardships of life, that he offers praise on behalf of those who will come after him: *"Posterity will serve God; future generations will be told about the LORD, and proclaim God's deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that God has done it!"* (vv. 30-31).

The apostle Paul captures this richly nuanced 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." He says we are always being given up to death," but that in God there is life* (vv. 11-12).

Modern life is filled with highs and low that cause us to swing from Pollyanna to Cassandra, and it is our hope in God's faithfulness through the highs and the lows that keeps us stable. There is always hope in God who is trustworthy, who listens, and who responds to the cries of God's children. This world is not as it should be and it is not how God envisioned it to be; but while hope lives, the world creeps ever closer to where God wills it to be.

For every Cassandra who wails, *"Why are you so far from helping me?"* (v. 1), a Pollyanna counters, *"The poor shall eat and be satisfied"* (v. 26). For each Cassandra who moans, *"I am scorned by others, and despised by the people"* (v. 6), a Pollyanna responds, *"dominion belongs to the LORD, and God rules over the nations"* (v. 28). For every Cassandra who questions, "Why me, God?" there is a Pollyanna who replies, "Thank you, God!"

To paraphrase Ecclesiastes 9:3-5: "This is the tragedy of everything that happens under the sun: Everyone shares the same destiny. Moreover, the hearts of mortals are full of evil. Madness is in their hearts while they are still alive. After that, they join the dead. But all who are among the living have hope."

We are among the living because of Jesus Christ. He died to free us from our old lives of sin and death. He rose again to offer us new and everlasting life in God's Kingdom. In this is our hope: that the world, for all its faults, is not yet what it will become. In Jesus is our hope: that we, for all our faults, are not what we will become. So, while we live, we hope in God to hear and to act on our behalf. So, neither a Cassandra nor a Pollyanna be! Strike the balance between the world's grief and God's hope. And if push comes to shove, lean toward hope!

Prayer: God, sometimes this world is hard to understand. And even when we trust you, our hearts still ache. So, we come asking for the hope we need. Hope that sees past the here-and-now to the then-and-there. Hope that believes what we cannot yet glimpse. Hope that holds our hearts up in the moments when life brings us to our knees. You are the only One who can sustain us. You are the only One who can save us. Be the rescuer of our souls, the deliverer of our dreams, the holder of our hearts. We believe that even the darkest night must lead to dawn. We wait with expectation. Give us courage. Surround us with comfort. Love us through to the other side in the way only you can. We put our hope, and our hopes for those we love, in you. Amen.

## Between Cassandra and Pollyanna

Sunday, April 29, 2018

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Psalms 22

2 Corinthians 4:1-12

An avid duck hunter went searching for a new bird dog. His search ended when he found a dog that could walk across the water to retrieve ducks. Knowing his friends would never believe his good luck, the hunter decided to first share the news with a friend of his, a pessimist. He figured if he could convince a pessimist, he could convince just about anyone. So, the hunter invited his pessimist friend to hunt with him and the dog. As they waited by the shore, a flock of ducks flew by. They both fired, and a duck fell. The dog responded immediately, jumping onto the water, and walking across it to retrieve the duck.

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 didn't say a 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!"

Stated simply: an optimist sees the best in things, while a pessimist sees only the worst. An optimist finds the positive in the negative, while a pessimist finds the negative in the positive. The optimist proclaims that we live in the best of all possible worlds. The pessimist fears that this is probably true.

So, let me ask you this: is the writer of Psalm 22 a pessimist or an optimist? The Psalmist thrashes wildly between a pessimistic view in which his foes have the upper hand and an optimistic hope that God will deliver him. He writes of God forsaking him, but also of God rescuing him. He questions God's faithfulness, but then calls on the people to give God praise. It's makes you wonder if the psalmist is schizophrenic, manic-depressive or just nuts.

It's hard to imagine lower-lows than we find in Psalm 22. The afflicted Psalmist's groan of lament begins *"But I am a worm, and not human"* (v.6) and proceeds to *"I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death"* (vv. 14-15) before ending with the stunningly graphic, *"My hands and feet have shriveled; I can count all my bones"* (v. 17).