

## **Ain't It Awful? It Ain't Awful!**

Romans 8: 28, 37-39

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If you followed the news this week you heard:

- A shooter gunned down four innocent people in downtown Cincinnati this week,
- The United States Presidency seems destined for a constitutional crisis,
- Millions of tons of plastics are washing up on beaches all over the world,
- Fires are burning up the West Coast,
- A thousand young parishioners in Pennsylvania were sexually abused by priests over five decades,
- Terrorist bombings at a sports club in Afghanistan killed twenty people and wounded seventy others
- Sixty-three thousand Americans died last year from opioid overdoses.

These were among the stories we heard. “*Ain't it awful?*” we lament. And depending on our tolerance for bad news, it's enough to make you skip the news, altogether.

Often such headlines make us long for a simpler time, when things were better, when the world and our communities were a safer, better place. And with that sentiment we often find ourselves thinking, and believing, that our time is the worst ever, that things were better thirty years ago or a hundred years ago.

One young woman wrote recently: “Does anyone else worry about bringing a baby into a world like this? I feel like my country is heading down a dark path. The world is already a dangerous place. I feel like I'm being selfish by having a baby that isn't asking to be here.”

For you and me, I often wonder where our Christian faith intersects with a question like that. Does our faith add a different perspective to such a gloomy narrative, or offer us a different lens to interpret the past, the present and the future? And one of the questions I ask is “After two thousand years, has the presence of Christian faith or Christian values shaped the world for the better; or has it made little difference in a world that at times seems awful and getting worse?”

What do you think? Is the world in fact worse off?

We Presbyterians are sometimes criticized for our headiness and a faith that is often tied to reason rather than emotion. But reason, logic, and a faith seeking understanding will always be in our DNA.

To that end, I wonder what the facts are about the state of the world. And after doing some digging, this is what I found:

- Thirty years ago, thirty-seven percent of the world's population was in poverty. Today, that number is ten percent.
- Thirty years ago, there were four hundred forty terrorist deaths in Europe. Last year, there were two hundred thirty-eight.
- Thirty years ago, there were sixty-three thousand nuclear weapons in the world. Today there are ten thousand.
- Thirty years ago, there were eighty-five countries lead by dictators. Today there are sixty.
- Thirty years ago, there were twenty-three ongoing wars. Today there are twelve.
- Thirty years ago, American homicides numbered twenty thousand. Last year it was seventeen thousand two hundred fifty while the population grew by almost one hundred million people in that time

And then this:

- In 1900, two percent of North Carolinians had running water.
- In the seventeenth century, less than fifteen percent of the European population could read. Today, worldwide, ninety percent of those under age twenty-five can read.
- In 1900, life expectancy in the world was thirty-one. Today it is seventy-one and in developed countries, life expectancy is now eighty-four.

Okay, I know that some of you who believe pessimism is realism will perhaps say that say that you can make statistics say anything. So, I discovered some scientists who say that humanity's progress or "well-being" can be measured objectively by evaluating and measuring ten or so categories. Those categories include such things as life expectancy, poverty, peace, prosperity, freedom, education, health, safety, and leisure.

I was fascinated by the category “leisure” and discovered that in the late 1800s, the average American worked more than sixty hours a week and that vacations were only for the very rich. Today, Americans work less than forty hours a week.

I regress. Anyway, the scientists say when you objectively measure the statistics from those categories, the world has made huge, unambiguous, objective progress over the last one hundred years, and in the last thirty years.

But don't you believe, on some days, that the world is worse off, not better? Or that the Christian faith influence on the world has been minimal?

I challenge you as a Christian, to change your narrative. Having a pessimistic or cynical view on life has a negative effect on just about everything and everybody. Right?

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. So he decided to try to break the news to one of his pessimistic friends by inviting him to hunt with him and see 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. But the dog did not sink but instead walked cross the water to retrieve the bird. This continued all day.

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

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

“I sure did,” his pessimistic friend said. “Your dog cannot swim!”

You see, I believe our Christian faith lays the groundwork to transform our negative pessimism into a hopeful, grace-filled optimism. Why? First, because I believe people of faith have strived and will continue to make the world better, more compassionate, more fair and more just. But secondly and more important, because I believe and we believe that God is in charge of the world and human history. Our ultimate faith is not in us but because we know

that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. God has the last word!

That's what Paul believed and it is one of the cornerstones of our faith. It is a hopeful, grace-filled optimism.

Which is to say, I believe, that we should take time to celebrate from where we've come and change our narrative from "*ain't it awful*" to "*It ain't awful*," We've made progress and God is in charge! As followers of Jesus we will continue to do so.

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Now, if your stand in the prophetic tradition of Christianity, hopeful, grace-filled optimism can be a challenge. Prophets raise the issues, make us uncomfortable and call us to action. But prophets can have a hard time celebrating because their focus is dominated by seeing what is wrong and motivating us into action.

We need prophets. But prophets often fear that celebration will be unmotivating.

Next weekend will be the fifty-fifth anniversary of one of America's most disgraceful acts of racial terrorism. On a Sunday morning, September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1963, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church of Birmingham, Alabama was gathered for Sunday school and worship. It was the church used by Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders to plan and organize civil rights strategies. Four members of the Ku Klux Klan planted fifteen sticks of dynamite attached to a timing device beneath the steps of the church.

At approximately 10:20 a.m., an anonymous man phoned the church. The call was answered by the acting Sunday school secretary. The anonymous caller simply said, "Three minutes." But less than one minute later, the bomb exploded as five children in the adjacent basement were changing into their choir robes. Four of the girls, ages eleven to fourteen were killed. The black minister's sermon that was scheduled to be delivered that morning was entitled "A Love That Forgives."

That was the America I grew up in. I was ten years old.

What does a hopeful, grace-filled Christian optimist say about such things?

It says we have made extraordinary progress in these fifty-five years. Can we celebrate that there are no white only drinking fountains now at the department stores? Or that former laws making it legal to discriminate or deny or forbid African Americans entrance into hotels and restaurants, amusement parks and theaters, schools and neighborhoods, have been eliminated? Or that black and white Christians became the *conscience of America* during the civil rights struggle? Or that a sign of our racial progress can be seen in a nation that elected a black president?

In a speech at Lyndon Baines Johnson's Library former President Obama said this racial progress: He acknowledged that racism has hardly been erased but he added, "I reject such cynicism around progress because I have lived out the promise of L.B.J.'s efforts, because Michelle has lived out the legacy of those efforts, because my daughters have lived out the legacy of those efforts."

Thanks to the law and the movement that spawned it and the progress made after it, Obama said, "new doors of opportunity and education swung open for everybody," regardless of race." he said. "And that's why I'm standing here today, because of those efforts, because of that legacy."

To acknowledge, to celebrate, to have a narrative that says "the world is a better place and we have made a difference because of our faith" does not mean that we are therefore unmotivated to continue to act.

Can we celebrate our renewed relationship with the Saint James congregation? Or celebrate the reconciliation service we shared a year ago? Yes. Does that mean we are less inclined to continue deepening our relationships between our congregations, or that we will stop working on the issues of race and racism? I give as evidence our initiative to have Debby Irving with us next Monday night, author of *Waking Up White*.

Here is the thing: Hopeful, grace-filled Christian optimists can see the possibilities. Often pessimism can often only see the problems and those problems become the obstacles for motivation.

And, by the way, do you know the number one indicator of a person's resilience and their ability to overcome adversity? Optimism.

There is a reason this cross is not a crucifix with the suffering Jesus as our primary symbol. The cross, the empty cross, of resurrection is our most audacious sign of hope ...and that hopeful optimism gives us reason to change our narrative, to both celebrate and to act.

In all these things we are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us.

Steven Pinker, TedTalk 2018, "Is the world getting better or worse? A look at the numbers"

Gregg Easterbrook, *The Progress Paradox*, Random House, 2004