

*Based on Luke 3:1-2. John the Baptist in the Wilderness.*

*The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.*

“Tragic Optimism is the Opposite of Toxic Positivity.”

So says the headline of one [Atlantic Monthly](#) article this August 18, 2021, as the Delta variant of COVID-19 made its way into our national consciousness.

The theory is this: while it is natural and even perhaps preferable to *look on the bright side of life*, especially when times are “wilderness tough,” doing so as a denial of reality can in fact be dangerous.

It may seem counter-intuitive, when it comes to our Advent theme of Birthing Hope through an Ongoing Pandemic, but as psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman writes, “refusing to look at life’s darkness and avoiding uncomfortable experiences can actually be *detrimental* to mental health” When we consistently avoid such so-called “negative emotions” as pain or discomfort, anger or envy, guilt or embarrassment, or such so-called “negative experiences” as setbacks or adversity, our psychological and spiritual muscles atrophy, both individually and collectively, leaving us vulnerable to collapse when “life happens,” in all of its inevitable tragedy.

The renowned psychologist and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl, offers an alternative: “tragic optimism,” as described in the postscript of his bestselling book *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Tragic optimism assumes, as the Buddha says, that life is suffering. “The tragic triad” of human existence, Frankl calls it: pain, guilt, and death. And, I would add, reflecting upon Frankl’s experience of genocide at the hands of White Christian nationalists, that tragic triad awaiting us all is too often exacerbated for evil purpose by some who hold power and privilege over many.

Looking at the bright side of the tragic triad, for Frankl and for so many others, is simply not an option. But the human potential for “turning suffering into ... achievement and accomplishment ... and deriving from life’s transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action” IS. Our hope emerges, in the view of tragic optimism, not because we blindly cling to our preferred outcome in life, but because we have the power to find meaning and to act with purpose in the tragedy of it all, to *say yes* to Life – with a capital L – in spite of every reason to say *no*.

This is the backdrop of Wilderness Hope that drives the mission of John the Baptist in our Lesson from Luke. The tragic triad is ever before him, as is a manifestation of evil purpose inflicted on his people by the powers-that-be.

It is no mere coincidence that Luke names those powers upfront as the narrative begins. A few of the names should sound familiar. Caiaphas, we know, will oversee a sham trial that claims Jesus is guilty of blasphemy. Pontius Pilate, we know, will ceremonially wash his hands of the crucifixion that same day. Herod – not to be confused with his father, Herod the Great – ends up becoming best buddies with Pontius Pilate as they cheer on Good Friday. These are all *bad* rulers, in the manner of Adolf Hitler and Heinrich Himmler in the time of Victor Frankl.

The rulers named by Luke do not just engage in one-and-done acts of terror against one person whose name is worshiped through a particular religious tradition two millennia later. There are crucifixions every week in the Jerusalem of John the Baptist. The pattern of exacerbating the tragic triad with intentional collective trauma is consistent before these rulers named in Luke's Gospel and after, before the execution of Jesus and after, baked into the fabric of several centuries' worth of Roman violence and destruction of the land John the Baptist calls *holy*.

The question for John is what to do about it.

John is not, in the grand scheme of the universe, without options. He comes from a highly respected priestly lineage on both his mother's side and his father's. The entire Gospel of Luke begins with the father of John the Baptist – Zechariah – offered the rarest of rare opportunities: to light the sacred flame of the Holiest of Holies, smack dab in the middle of the magnificent Jerusalem Temple, where power and privilege run rampant.

If anyone has learned from his youth the art of rubbing shoulders with the powerful and the privileged it is John. The most prestigious divinity schools and the most influential pulpits are his for the taking. John could, if he so desired, make his peace with those powers-that-be, turn a blind eye to the trauma-exacerbated tragic triad in his midst, and live with relative luxury in the priestly lineage that is rightfully his.

John chooses the wilderness instead.

The wilderness, in John's time and in ours, is a holy place. With life stripped down to its core – where even the basic necessities seem hard to come by – the sacred mysteries of life and death and everything in between come in to clearer focus. Psychological and spiritual growth often soar in the wilderness, even while material growth is scarce. Such growth can include, as our psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman says, “a greater appreciation of one's life and relationships, as well as increased compassion, altruism, purpose, utilization of personal strengths, spiritual development, and creativity.”

All of those things have been true for us at SPC in this ongoing COVID wilderness. I hear it from you all the time. Including the sentiment that trying to endure this COVID wilderness *without* the sense of meaning, hope, and belonging we find in this community would be nearly impossible.

Which brings us back to that word: hope. And the kind of hope we find ourselves birthing through this particular time in the wilderness. For a while, we do confess, our hope was outcome-driven: a return to normalcy, a vision for utopia emerging from the muck, the great sonnet we would write or the magnum opus we would compose.

The Lesson of John the Baptist, through the wisdom of Victor Frankl, inspires something different: wilderness hope. A hope that *chooses*, in the spirit of John, to go ahead and be bound by this COVID wilderness, even when some form of escapism might be available to us. A hope that lets this COVID wilderness do its work on us, leading us to our own unique version of tragic optimism.

Such tragic optimism, such wilderness hope, is open to any and all outcomes on the other side of COVID. And, dare I even say it, to no “outcome” at all. Wilderness hope does not assume we will *ever* “come out” of COVID. Wilderness hope emphatically has zero connection with outcome. It is simply saying *yes* to every part of the

human condition, simply showing up and keeping on keeping on, in spite of every reason to say *no*. Such tragic optimism, such wilderness hope, is choosing gratitude for life in *all* of its fullness, and for the human and non-human relationships that populate that life, and for the chance to make a difference – in large ways or in small – within those relationships, no matter the circumstances taking place in that life.

“Existential gratitude,” this kind of hope is called in the psychological world. A shift in orientation that says *I am still here, in spite of it all*. That *we* are still here, in spite of it all. That we, like the apostle Paul, have come to trust that absolutely nothing in life or in death – including an ongoing pandemic – can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And that we, like John the Baptist, have decided to act on that trust.

Let the church say, Amen!