

November 28, 2021 (Advent I) | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Psalm 130](#)

TITLE: Advent Hope: Watching for the Best

Let's start with a short pop quiz. You can confer with your pewmate or whomever is next to you at home. Question #1: True or False—You increase your chance of winning the lottery by playing the same numbers every time. Question #2: If six babies were born last night in the hospital, what is the most likely order of births: BBBGGG, GGGGGG, or BGGGBG? Question #3: How big a group of people do you need so that there's a 50% chance two of them share the same birthday?

Back to Question #1. We often hear how someone played the same lottery numbers over and over and finally won the big jackpot, so we assume there's a correlation when in truth there is none. Lotteries are by definition random—so whether you play the same numbers every day or have the machine pick out six random numbers for you, both have the same tiny chance of winning. So the answer is False. Question #2: It feels odd to imagine that a given night in the hospital maternity ward might produce three boys and then three girls, or six girls in a row. We are pattern seekers, and we think the pattern of births in a hospital must alternate between the two choices—like flipping a coin can alternate between heads and tails. So we assume the likely answer is Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl—or perhaps boy, girl, girl, boy, girl, boy—when in truth the births are totally random and any likely sequence of boy/girl, including all boys or all girls, is just as likely as another.¹

And question #3: Since there are 365 days in the year, you'd think that you need 365 people in the group to ensure that at least 2 of them shared the same birthday—and if you want a 50% chance of this happening, you'd need half that number, or about 183. But don't forget that each person is comparing their birth date with everyone else in the room—so this lowers the number of people you need to find a birthday match. In truth, you only need about 57 people in a room to have a 99% chance of a birthday match and a group as small as 23 people will have a 50% likelihood of two of them sharing the same birthday.

Now what does any of this have to do with God or the bible or Psalm 130? As I mentioned earlier, human beings are pattern seekers. We are biologically programmed to look for patterns. A Neanderthal walking across the Serengeti Plain might see one lion per day on the horizon, but one afternoon he or she saw two lions. The number of lions may be totally random, but for the Neanderthal's sake, it makes sense to take cover if there are more predators in the area. Our lives are filled with random events. It is fine to react to what we see—such as hiding from lions or carrying an umbrella when we see dark clouds above us—but it is another thing altogether to believe there is a larger pattern at work here. Some nights six baby girls are born in a row. Sometimes what looks like a pattern is just the randomness of life.

An interviewer asked the Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker whether or not there was a pattern to the recent series of negative events—such as the rise of global

authoritarianism, the pandemic, and the climate crisis. Did it mean the world was “going to hell in a handbasket”? Pinker said that it is important to react to bad things and to take steps to make things better, but the fact that they are clustering together doesn't necessarily mean there's a pattern. Whenever different events are randomly scattered in time, they will cluster together as opposed to being evenly spaced out. That may sound paradoxical, but it's true. You would need something nonrandom to regulate them to get bad things to only happen at regular intervals. By definition of being random, big events—both good and bad - come in clusters.²

Life is full of random events. In reacting to these random events, we superimpose patterns onto them as a way to try and make sense of the world. And as people of faith, we are prone to naming God as the source of these so-called patterns—blessing us when several good things in a row happen, cursing us or warning us when bad things come in clusters. Yet that is not the way of faith according to Psalm 130.

Remember how Psalm 130 began: *Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord*. The image here is of someone sinking beneath the waves in a stormy sea. You feel swamped, overwhelmed, going down for the third time. When bad things happen, we regularly use the language of the deep or depths. We speak about a deepening recession or a deepening crisis; someone is deeply depressed or we come down with the flu or a virus. The Psalmist doesn't say what has caused these troubles; instead the psalm honestly names that sometimes we find ourselves in deep water and struggling to keep afloat. Think for a moment about a time in your own life in which you cried out to God from your depths.

Now, being rational creatures, we look for a way out of the depths. We look for patterns, a way to make sense of this wave of bad luck. A voice somewhere may tell us that we are being punished, that our sins have brought this to bear upon us. And if we just do better—try harder—we'll find our footing on solid ground and God will bless us again. But that's all wrong and it is as if the Psalmist knew we would think that way. The next verse bluntly challenges the idea that we can save ourselves. It says, *If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, who could stand?* If the report card of our lives truly is based on a reckoning of our good deeds versus our sins and failings, then who could stand? Who could claim self-righteousness in the eyes of God?

We are not saved by works, but by grace. That's the core truth in the verse that follows: *But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered*. We can't get out of the depths on our own. We certainly can't earn our way to solid ground. Salvation is not transactional; it is foundational. God forgives us. God hears when we are swamped in deep waters, for it is God's nature to hear and to care. And God doesn't mark iniquities. God doesn't weigh us in the balance. God forgives—freely, generously, graciously.

We look for patterns and thereby hope we can control life's events. Yet some things are random. Six numbers played one time only do win the lottery. Six baby girls sometimes are born in a row. Salvation doesn't come because you crack the code of what God requires of you. It comes because we are forgiven—an unearned, unmerited, amazing

grace. That good news is our solid ground upon which we stand by faith. That news is what rescues us from the depths.

In the same way, the psalm concludes by talking about “waiting for the Lord.” We humans tend to define waiting in terms of our own situation and we don’t like it: Waiting in the grocery store line; waiting at the DMV to get a Real ID; waiting for test results; waiting for an income tax refund. All of us are generally impatient—we want things now, on our schedule, to meet our needs. But just like the answers to the earlier pop quiz flipped around some of our expectations, the bible speaks about waiting in a way different than expected. How? Because the focus is not on us but on God: *Wait for the Lord. Hope in the Lord.*

Waiting that is directed to God is anticipatory, like a watchman waiting for the report of supplies that are on their way or being told a wedding party will soon arrive for a big festivity. We wait with eagerness for ways of living on earth that are just, merciful and caring—ways modeled after the example of Christ for whom we wait and in whom we hope. This type of anticipatory waiting prompts us to change laws now to make them more just; to give generously to churches and charities and those in need as acts of kindness and mercy; to recognize that if even just 22 people plus us were randomly collected from the four corners of the earth and put in a room—two of them would likely share the same birthday. And of those 22 people, certainly someone would be about our size, or like the same foods, or have a family like ours. By God’s grace, we would see how similar we actually are—something surprising in a random world where so many ungodly patterns of thought try to convince us to ignore and avoid those who are different.

In giving you the pop quiz earlier, it was my intent that the surprising answers to those opening questions might help you see Advent in a different, unexpected yet comforting way. On this first Sunday of Advent, we lit a candle and named it “Advent Hope.” Contrary to what we tell ourselves, we cannot save ourselves. We cannot get out of the depths alone or by our own resources. So we cry out to the Lord, for whom we wait with anticipation, with expectation and confidence. And we hope in the Lord, in whom there is life, forgiveness, and (in the words of the psalmist) steadfast love and great power to redeem.

Hope is something we can’t give ourselves. Yet Advent reminds us that hope is given to us by God and we are invited to receive it. There’s nothing random about it. No formula or code to break or human-conceived pattern to control it. It simply is—a gift given by God to us. Like watchers waiting for the morning light, hope comes to us now and always. Hear and receive this good news.

AMEN

¹ For this and other examples, see Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, 2011, pp. 109-118.

² *Talk* by David Marchese, *New York Times Magazine*, September 3, 2021. Interview with Steven Pinker.