During Advent, we talk a lot about hope. That’s what the season is about, right—hope? Hope for the return of Christ, hope for the future of our species and our planet, hope for the return of light and the forgiveness of sin and the end of death. Hope for the healing of the nations and of the world. We remind ourselves that, just as we know Christmas is coming at the end of the month, the days are surely coming when Jesus will return and establish God’s reign of peace and justice over all the earth. But what are we to do when that thing for which we are hoping seems to be so far off?

This is the question with which Malachi and his fellow prophets grapple. According to the theology that frames their lives, God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked; but these people have lived through Exile and the return. Their lived reality suggests that God either doesn’t care or can’t help. Not only do the godless rule over the godly, but immoral actions seem to have no consequences. Liars, cheats and scoundrels prosper while nice guys finish last. It’s enough to make people wonder: is there any reason to obey commandments or act justly when it doesn’t seem to matter one way or the other?

Malachi assures his readers that the messenger of the LORD is coming, and that when he comes, things are going to change. The priests—and perhaps also the people—of Jerusalem and Judea will be purified from injustice and corruption like silver is refined from ore. Then, he says, they will be able to make offerings pleasing to the LORD, like in the old days. But when will that be?

In Luke’s gospel story, the evangelist presents John the Baptist as the fulfillment of this hope. Amidst the backdrop of the major players like Herod and Philip and Pilate and Lysanias appears this nobody, this crazy man with bugs in his beard, this voice in the wilderness preparing the way for the One in whom we hope. But we know the story. We know John was beheaded, and Jesus—the One for whom John prepared the way—was crucified. So much for hope.

Now, hope is important. It is with good reason that we focus ourselves and hone our hope during this Advent season, especially in these days when hope can sometimes seem in such short supply. Hope can keep us from despair, give us reason to go on; but hope has its limits. As we sit in the darkness of Advent, we are faced with the reality that sometimes hope never comes to fruition; at least, not for us.

Ta-Nehisi Coates observes: “Slavery in this country was 250 years. What that means is that there were African Americans who were born in this country in 1750, 1760 and if they looked backwards their parents were slaves, their grandparents were slaves, their great grandparents were slaves. If they looked forward, their children will be slaves, their grandchildren will be slaves, and possibly, their great grandchildren will be slaves. There was no real hope within their individual life span of ending enslavement—the most brutal form of degradation in this country’s history. There was nothing in their life that said, ‘This will end in my lifetime. I will see the end of this.’”[[1]](#endnote-1)

As we stare into the dark of Advent, we are confronted with the fact that, sometimes, there is no hope, no matter how badly we want there to be. Sometimes, there is simply sin and death and evil. That is life: the dark is as real as the light. Hope can give us the strength to face the dark, but sometimes hope can also be a drug that we can use to ignore the dark.

Austin Channing Brown recalls how after Coates’ published *Between the World and Me*, his memoir of Black life in America, the media—both secular and religious—sought endlessly for some kernel of hope in it. “People read his words about America—about its history, about its present, about the realities of living in a Black body—and then demanded hopefulness. It boggles the mind,” she writes.[[2]](#endnote-2)

As I consider our Advent scripture readings today, and the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates and Austin Channing Brown, I begin to wonder if hope can sometimes be used as a tool of privilege. Whiteness can demand hope and enforce its fulfillment. People like Herod and Philip and Pilate and Lysanias can create hope with the machinery of Empire, bringing law and order, promising safety and health and stability; but it always comes at a cost. That hope means that people like Brown and Coates cannot hope, not in the same way. People like John and Jesus, and the Judeans of their time and of Malachi’s time, and the African Americans born in the middle of the 18th century cannot hope, not like Herod or Pilate can. They can never see their hopes fulfilled, no matter what they do or how hard they try.

And yet, somehow, this does not mean they despair. Coates goes on to observe that, despite having no hope whatsoever of seeing the end of slavery in any meaningful period of time, those folks still struggled for freedom; they still resisted the degradation of their bodies and the abuse of their humanity. How can that be possible without hope? Without hope, isn’t despair all that remains? Perhaps not. Brown writes in her own memoir about the death of hope. I will quote her here at length because she says what I cannot:

I have learned not to fear the death of hope. I don’t really want to recount all the ways that hope has let me down; it’s so damn painful. But all of this comes with living, with struggling, with believing in the possibility of change. The death of hope gives way to a sadness that heals, to anger that inspires, to a wisdom that empowers me the next time I get to work, pick up my pen, join a march, tell my story.

Each death of hope has been painful and costly. But in the mourning there always rises a new clarity about the world, about the Church, about myself, about God.

I cannot hope in whiteness. I cannot hope in white people or white institutions or white America. I cannot hope in lawmakers or politicians, and I cannot hope even in pastors or ministries or mission statements. I cannot hope in misquoted wisdom from MLK, superficial ethnic heritage celebrations, or love that is aloof. I cannot hope even in myself. I am no one’s savior. The longer this list gets, the more elusive hope becomes…

I do not believe that I or my children or my grandchildren will live in an America that has achieved racial equality. And so I stand in the legacy of all that Black Americans have already accomplished—in their resistance, in their teachings, in their voices, in their faith—and I work toward a world unseen, currently unimaginable. I look at the present—police brutality, racial disparities, backlash against being “politically correct,” hatred for our first Black president, the gutting of the Voting Rights Act, and the election of a chief executive who stoked the fire of racial animosity to win—and I ask myself, “Where is your hope, Austin?” The answer: It is but a shadow…

In this [cool] place, I see the sun setting behind me, its light as far away as the stars, and I let the limitations of hope settle over me. I possess not the strength of hope but its weakness, its fragility, its ability to die. Because I must demand anyway. It is my birthright. It is the culmination of everything my ancestors endured, of all that my parents taught me, of the Blackness that rescued me. How dare I consider surrender simply because I want the warmth of the sun? This warmth has not been promised to me. My faith does not require it.[[3]](#endnote-3)

What I hear Brown saying in these words is that, as a Black woman in America, she cannot pretend that the darkness does not exist. She does not have the luxury of ignoring or dismissing it like White people can. She has been left with no choice but to stare into the darkness; but it is that very darkness—the shadow of hope, the death of hope—which enables her to do what she knows she must; not in the hopes that she may one day harvest the fruit of that work, but because the work itself is important and good; because the work itself is *righteous*.

And this reminds me of something. It reminds me that Advent is not just about hope, but about *preparation*. Malachi today speaks of the messenger who will come and *prepare* the descendants of Levi—a process which, he implies, will be arduous and unpleasant, like being subjected to the heat of a refining fire or the caustic soap of a fuller, but which is also *righteous*: good and important in its own right. Paul encourages the Philippians by reminding them that the good work begun among them *by God* will produce the harvest of righteousness. He reminds them that they are being *prepared* for something.

Malachi and Paul do not present this preparation as something we can do for or to ourselves, but something that *is done to us* from the outside. And so, I wonder if, beside the light of hope, the darkness itself can also prepare us for God’s reign. That’s what I hear in Brown’s words. I hear her saying that the death of her hope has kept her from simply *waiting* for God’s reign and actually *pushed her into* *it*. We speak of God’s reign as both already and not yet. While White folks can hope for the “not yet” from the comfort and safety of privilege, the darkness of racism and oppression has swept Brown up into the “already.” That is the legacy of Black Americans, she says: to live the reality of justice and equality although that reality does not yet exist.

I wonder if, by focusing too much on hope—by straining our eyes to try to look beyond or through the darkness rather than at it, by demanding hope when there is none to be found—if we sometimes use hope to escape the heat of the fire that would refine us of our apathy and complacency. When we demand that our dissatisfaction and discomfort be taken away, are we closing ourselves off to what God is doing in the dark? This Advent season, I wonder if even the death of our hope for Jesus’ return might be another way in which God prepares us for his coming.

1. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* book tour audience Q&A, Oct 15, 2015. https://www.teachingforchange.org/ta-nehisi-coates-on-teaching-history [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Austin Channing Brown, *I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*. 2018. Excerpt at https://onbeing.org/blog/austin-channing-brown-standing-in-the-shadow-of-hope/ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *ibid* [↑](#endnote-ref-3)