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“No doubt it will be a very quiet Christmas everywhere, and the children will remember it for a long time to come.”¹ So said Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a letter to his parents, written from a German prison shortly before Christmas in 1943. I pulled Bonhoeffer’s letter from my shelf this past week, searching for wisdom concerning the season we’ve now entered. I often think of Bonhoeffer’s letter at this time of the year, but I’ve never preached on it. His circumstances usually seemed far removed from our own, and the quiet Christmas he predicts for 1943 has never quite matched the celebrations we tend to plan. And yet, as I reread his words this past week, they seemed uniquely suited to the year we’re living through, and the Christmas we’re likely to experience in 2020. And so I thought I’d share a little of what Bonhoeffer discovered that year, in hopes that it might inform how we approach this season, when the Meetinghouse shall remain empty, when the carols and anthems are silenced, when we’re increasingly confined to our own individual spaces, and when the specter of suffering hangs low. No doubt it will be a very quiet Christmas everywhere. But that may free us to sense a different kind of meaning in the holiday, one that often remains hidden, fugitive before the dominant commercial strains of the season.

Bonhoeffer’s story is well known, though it may not be familiar to everyone. And so by way of introduction, let me tell you just a little bit about this most unlikely prisoner. If you know anything about him, you likely know that he was imprisoned in 1943 for participating in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Indeed, that’s how it came to be that he was writing from prison in that year. But that fact alone doesn’t reveal a great deal about Bonhoeffer. He wasn’t a revolutionary by nature, and he abhorred violence. He was a mild-mannered pastor, and an academic, more suited to the library and the classroom than the barricades. Not only that, he was raised in a large and loving family – Bonhoeffer remained deeply devoted to his parents and siblings for the entirety of his life. Throughout his career, he published several books that have earned him lasting acclaim, some of which you may know: *The Cost of Discipleship*, *Ethics*, and a shorter book about community entitled *Life Together*.

There are some aspects of Bonhoeffer’s writings that read as quite conservative theologically, to the point that many evangelicals in America claim him as one of their own. In fact, a recent, ill-conceived biography of Bonhoeffer tried to press him into the service of far-right evangelical politics here in the United States. But he is a more complicated, and a far more nuanced figure by far. One episode in particular stands out in his life, which tends to be overlooked by latter day interpreters. While studying in New York City for a year as a seminary student, Bonhoeffer initially struggled to connect with the students and professors that made up the world of Union Theological Seminary. He felt disenchanted with the study of theology in the United States – until he crossed 125th St. and went deep into Harlem. It’s there that he encountered black religion, attending the Abyssinian Baptist Church, and even teaching Sunday School there. It was there that he forged a lasting friendship with Adam Clayton Powell, the minister of Abyssinian. He immersed himself in the stories of black America during that time,

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Touchstone/Simon and Schuster, 1953), pg. 166.

and discovered a passion for black music. Bonhoeffer even carried a collection of African American spirituals back to Germany when his studies concluded. He discovered the writings of the Harlem Renaissance. Because of that time in Harlem, Bonhoeffer went on to make a trek through the Jim Crow South, where he witnessed a kind of proto-fascism in action. In the black churches of the South, he reported that “he heard the Gospel preached in the church of the outcasts of America.” Informed by those experiences, Bonhoeffer went on to formulate what he called a “theology from below,” conducted from the perspective of those in the world most exposed to suffering.

I’m telling you all of this because that experience in Harlem and in the Deep South helped to alert Bonhoeffer to the creeping tide of fascism in Germany and other parts of Europe, long before much of the public registered alarm. For them, the economy was booming. Roads were being built, ordinary people could afford cars and other household goods. For most, the nationalist rhetoric spilling out over the airways was unfortunate, but not something to be overly concerned about. Keep in mind that it took five years of tiny, incremental steps from 1933-1938, testing the limits of public acceptance, before *Kristellnacht* occurred. But Bonhoeffer was remarkably cognizant of what those tiny incremental steps portended. And much of that awareness came from what he learned in Harlem and the American South. That’s why classics like *The Cost of Discipleship*, *Ethics*, and *Life Together*, along with Bonhoeffer’s prison papers, deserve to be rediscovered as works belonging to a subset of black theology, rather than being read as works of German piety, or, more implausibly still, as belonging to right wing evangelicalism. To my knowledge, no one has yet pressed that case in full. Given the upheavals we have experienced concerning racial injustice this year, it may be worth taking up Bonhoeffer from a new vantage point, where “costly grace,” as opposed to the cheap grace that Bonhoeffer abhorred, would be applied to the hard work of racial reparation and reconciliation. No doubt there were other sources of insight that allowed for Bonhoeffer’s prescient wisdom, but we can be grateful that Harlem was a foundational experience in his moral, ethical, and political development.

There’s one more thing I want to tell you about Bonhoeffer before we get to that Christmas letter. He had the opportunity to flee Germany. In fact, he did flee Germany in 1939. He returned to the United States at the invitation of none other than Reinhold Niebuhr, who secured a teaching post for him at Union Theological Seminary in New York. But Bonhoeffer only lasted there for two weeks. He felt tortured, believing that it was his responsibility to struggle, and if necessary, to suffer, alongside his people. It was an instance where his own principles, the theology from below that he had first started developing in Harlem, wouldn’t allow him to remain safely aloof during the struggle. And so he left that place of safety, so coveted by so many, and he returned to a situation that would ultimately bring him great suffering. But not only suffering. It would also bring him courage, peace, wisdom, and an abiding insight into the nature of the Christian story, and indeed, the Christmas story.

I would argue that Bonhoeffer’s return to Germany is actually an enactment of Christmas, as recounted not in the Gospels, but in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, which I hasten to add, was also written from a prison cell. Here’s what Paul said in that letter: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” Those words are considered to be some of the earliest in the New Testament, an ancient hymn that Paul quoted in his letter. In essence, they depict Jesus as leaving the realm of the eternal, a place of comfort and safety, in order to take up residence in a hostile

environment, one that would expose him to danger, and yes, to suffering. For all the tenderness that we attribute to that night in Bethlehem, it is an occasion of intense vulnerability and trust, in which God is exposed as a helpless little child, subject to the same conditions experienced by humans in all times and places: hunger and also wonder, loneliness and also human connection, doubt and also courageous resolution, grief and also overwhelming joy. Jesus leaves the realm of the eternal to dwell as a light in the darkness, the darkness that all too often we experience as our own. He emptied himself, and was born in human likeness, the better that we might see that however dark or lonely our circumstances, God is right there with us.

That's what Bonhoeffer understood when he left the United States for a second time and returned to Germany. God is found inside of life's most profound struggles, not outside of them. And it's what he understood as he composed his letter to his parents on the 17th of December, 1943. He had been hoping that a lawyer might intervene in order to secure his release. But it was not to be. And so Bonhoeffer burrowed deep, in order to find the resources he needed to confront the difficulty and disappointment of the moment. He refuses to let himself dwell upon his loneliness. Instead, he marshals what he learned from his parents in the celebration of Christmases past. He writes from his cell that he is conscious of being borne up by a spiritual tradition going back for centuries, one that gives him confidence and security in the face of present strains. And then he writes these extraordinary words, an example of the theology from below that he first developed in Harlem: "From the Christian point of view there is no special problem about Christmas in a prison cell," he writes. "For many people in this building it will probably be a more sincere occasion than in places where nothing but the name is kept...that God will approach where men turn away, that Christ was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn – these are things that a prisoner can understand better than other people; for him they really are glad tidings."²

Our circumstances aren't nearly so bleak as Bonhoeffer's in 1943. Our celebrations will certainly be muted this year, but it's not as though we reside in a German prison. Still, there are some important lessons that we might gather from Bonhoeffer's letter, lessons that we can take with us into this season. The first is an act of will, to rebuke the temptation to be depressed by a lonely, or lonelier, Christmas. Bonhoeffer had every reason to succumb to self-pity or disappointment, and no doubt he felt those things acutely. But he wouldn't allow himself to reside there permanently. He took up a pen and paper, and he reached out to the people he loved most. Let that be the first learning that we take from Bonhoeffer's letter: the antidote to whatever sadness or loss we might feel is to get in touch with people we care about. If that's your lot this year, use it as the impetus to make a call, to get on Zoom, to write an email, or better still, to write a letter.

Another lesson that Bonhoeffer provides is this: to depend upon a spiritual tradition bequeathed to us by previous generations, who have turned to the stories and symbols of the Christian faith in order to get through difficult times. That's one of the things Christmas is for. In addition to the dinners and the presents, the songs and the decorations, it's about recalling a story that's meant to help in times of trouble. It's about giving our children and grandchildren something that can anchor them when they feel adrift. When Bonhoeffer thanks his parents for all they bestowed upon him as a child in Christmases past, that's what he's referring to – the belonging that he felt, the peace that he felt in those moments, yes, but also the sense of being rooted within a spiritual tradition that connects to ages past, one that somehow bears us up when things get difficult. Bonhoeffer suggests that the celebration of Christmases past was a kind of

² Ibid.

deposit that he could draw on when he was in prison, one that bestowed confidence and security upon him. I wonder if we've built that sort of deposit in our own celebrations from year to year. I wonder if our own children might look upon what we've done from year to year not as a chance to rake in a lot of loot, but as a deposit from which they could draw strength and love. I wonder if a year such as this might help to orient us, so that whatever our holiday traditions might be, we understand them as creating something solid and lasting within our inner lives, something that we might draw upon in years to come.

But above all, the lesson that we might draw from Bonhoeffer's letter is his assurance that it is to the prisoner that Christ is born, which is to say, all those who have reason to sense the darkness of the world, all those who find themselves trapped, all those who find themselves feeling isolated and lost. I would dare say that applies to most all of us this year, though to varying degrees I'm sure. God approaches where most human beings turn away Bonhoeffer says, which is to say that God approaches those parts of our own lives where we feel most uncertain or afraid. That means that you may approach this season with whatever darkness is in you, be it fear or alienation, anxiety or pain, sadness or bitterness, whatever your darkness happens to be, and the presence of Christ will shine upon it. "Come to me," he says, "all you who are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest."

There is not, in the New Testament, or any other part of the Bible, a promise that the darkness of the world will soon disappear. There is not, in the New Testament or any other part of the Bible, an assurance that you or I will be protected from whatever destructive powers might be at work in the world at any given time. The promise of Christmas, however, is that God visits the dark places first and foremost, the prison cells and the dank mangers, to say nothing of the shadows within our own hearts. The promise is that the light brought into this world at Christmas continues to shine, and that because of it, no matter what happens, no matter the circumstances in which we find ourselves, the darkness shall be powerless, as Paul once wrote, "to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

A year after writing his 1943 Christmas letter, Bonhoeffer was still in prison. He would in fact be executed a few months later. But once again he wrote to his parents. And he included in his letter a prayer, which concludes in the following way:

With every power for good to stay and guide me,
 Comforted and inspired beyond all fear,
 I'll live these days with you in thought beside me,
 And pass, with you, into the coming year.

Today, let candles shed their radiant greeting;
 Lo, on our darkness are they not thy light
 Leading us, haply, to our longed for meeting?
 Thou canst illumine even our darkest night.³

It will be a quiet Christmas this year. Even so, my prayer is that your darkest night shall be illumined by the light of a God drawn near to you. My prayer, with Bonhoeffer, is that for the first time, perhaps, many will learn the true meaning of Christmas.

³ Ibid, pg. 400.