

Reading  
with  
Leader's  
Guide

VINTAGE  
Saints & Sinners

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

*Our readings come from two of Pastor Bonhoeffer's sermons. The first he preached in 1933, shortly before Hitler came to power. It was a time of tension and widespread fear. The fragile Weimar government, Germany's first republic, was about to go under, and with it the threat of open fighting in the streets, of communism and other extremist movements. In the midst of this storm, Bonhoeffer was no more certain of the future than anyone else. Here he speaks to his fellow followers of Christ.*

**Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!" Matthew 8:23-27**

The Bible, the gospel, Christ, the church, the faith—all are one great battle cry against fear in the lives of human beings. Fear is, somehow or other, the archenemy itself. It crouches in people's hearts. It hollows out their insides, until their resistance and strength are spent and they suddenly break down. Fear secretly gnaws and eats away at all the ties that bind a person to God and to others, and when in a time of need that person reaches for those ties and clings to them, they break and the individual sinks back into himself or herself, helpless and despairing, while hell rejoices. Now fear leers that person in the face, saying: Here we are all by ourselves, you and I....

*Bonhoeffer says that the Bible is one great battle cry against fear. What could he mean by this? How does Bonhoeffer describe the dynamics of fear? Where have you seen fear at work? What is the connection between fear and loneliness?*

But the human being doesn't have to be afraid; we should not be afraid! That is what makes humans different from all other creatures. In the midst of every situation where there is no way out, where nothing is clear, where it is our fault, we know that there is hope, and this hope is called: Thy will be done, yes, thy will is being done. "This world must fall, God stands above all, his thoughts unswayed, his Word unstayed, his will forever our ground and hope."

Do you ask: How do you know? Then we name the name of the One who makes the evil inside us recoil, who makes fear and anxiety themselves tremble with fear and puts them to flight. We name the One who overcame fear and led it captive in the victory procession, who nailed it to the cross and committed it to oblivion; we name the One who is the shout of victory of humankind redeemed from the fear of death—Jesus Christ, the Crucified and Living One. He alone is Lord over fear; it knows him as its master; it gives way to him alone. So look to Christ when you are afraid, think of Christ, keep him before your eyes, call upon Christ and pray to him, believe that he is with you now, helping you....Then fear will grow pale and fade away, and you will be free, through your faith in our strong and living Savior, Jesus Christ.

*Bonhoeffer's listeners are surrounded by real physical threats and legitimate fear. How does Bonhoeffer address their fear? How would you feel, what would you think, if you were hearing this sermon in Berlin 1933? How does it speak to your life right now?*



Let's say there is a ship on the high sea, having a fierce struggle with the waves. The storm wind is blowing harder by the minute. The boat is small, tossed about like a toy; the sky is dark; the sailors' strength is failing. Then one of them is gripped by... whom? what? He cannot tell himself.... Fear is in the boat; all arms are frozen and drop their oars; all hope is lost, Fear is in the boat. Then it is as if the heavens opens, as if the heavenly hosts themselves raise a shout of victory in the midst of hopelessness: Christ is in the boat. Christ is in the boat, and no sooner has the call gone out and been heard than Fear shrinks back, and the waves subside. The sea becomes calm and the boat rests on its quiet surface. Christ was in the boat!...

*How do you hear this familiar Gospel story in a new way?*

*You of little faith, why are you so fearful?* In these words we must hear all the disappointment of Jesus Christ in his disciples and all his love for them. Do you still not know that you are in God's hands, that where I am, God is? Why are you so fearful? Be of good courage, strong, firm, adult, sure, confident, not shaking with fear. Don't hang your heads; don't complain about what bad times these are . . . I am in the boat. So why not hear him and believe? All of us see only our own worries and difficulties and no longer those of others that may be a thousand times worse. Our affairs seem so enormous and infinitely important to us that we have become dulled toward anything else. This is the work of fear in us....

*Where are you experiencing fear right now? Imagine Jesus speaking to you, saying, "You of little faith, why are you so fearful?" What emotions come up at these words? What is keeping you from experiencing confidence in God's presence? Why is our fear so powerful over us?*

There is one thing we are lacking: to believe that the Almighty God is our father and our Lord. To believe that for God, our greatest cares are like the worries of small children in their parents' eyes; that God can turn things around and dispose of them in no time at all; for God it's easy, not hard at all. We must believe that a thousand years in God's sight are like a day, that God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts, that God is with us in spite of everything. Let us receive the call of the church once again: *You of little faith, why are you so fearful?* In the midst of the storm, Christ is in the ship. Away with you, Fear! Let us see you, Lord Jesus, strong helper, Savior.... You cannot believe? Well, neither can we. Do you want to believe?—in that case you already do, in a way, perhaps not very strongly, only a beginning, but perhaps a thousand times stronger than many others who think they are able to believe. Don't worry about your faith, whether it is weak or strong. Just look to him in whom you believe, and speak to him: Lord, increase our faith!

*What new ideas does Bonhoeffer introduce in this section? What does he say about unbelief? What has Bonhoeffer taught you?*

*If you could ask Dietrich Bonhoeffer one question, what would it be?*

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*Our response to the calamities of this world may be, "Behold, the day of the Lord is coming." In 1928, Bonhoeffer, only 22 years old and pastoring in Barcelona, preached this next sermon. In the church calendar, Advent (which means "coming") is not just a prelude to the celebration of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem but also a time to think more broadly about God's future coming again. There are two Advent questions: Do you believe in the first coming of Jesus in humility? and do you hope for his second coming in glory? And how are you preparing?*



**Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. Revelation 3:20**

When early Christianity spoke of the return of the Lord Jesus, they thought of a great day of judgment....It is original Christianity and to be taken extremely seriously. When we hear Jesus knocking, our conscience first of all pricks us: Are we rightly prepared? Is our heart capable of becoming God's dwelling place? Thus Advent becomes a time of self-examination. "Put the desires of your heart in order, O human beings!" (Valentin Thilo), as the old song sings: Our whole life is an Advent, a time of waiting for the ultimate, for the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, when all people will be brothers and sisters.

It is very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming so calmly, whereas previously peoples trembled at the day of God, whereas the world fell into trembling when Jesus Christ walked over the earth. That is why we find it so strange when we see the marks of God in the world so often together with the marks of human suffering, with the marks of the cross on Golgotha.

*What does this word Advent mean to you? Has the thought of Jesus Christ ever prompted a sense of trembling in you? Where have you seen the marks of God in the world together with the marks of human suffering? How have you thought about that?*

We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience. Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love. God makes us happy as only children can be happy.

*What words or phrases really stand out for you? Read them out loud now.*

*Bonhoeffer remarks that "we are indifferent to the message"... What message is this? Do you see this indifference in Christians you know?*

*Is there a distinction between the "fear" that Bonhoeffer speaks about in the first sermon and the "terror" he describes here?*

*What role does holy fear play in your experience?*

*How does terror lead to a recognition of God's kindness? What could it mean to say that God makes us happy as only children can be happy?*

God wants to always be with us, wherever we may be – in our sin, in our suffering and death. We are no longer alone; God is with us. We are no longer homeless; a bit of the eternal home itself has moved unto us. Therefore we adults can rejoice deeply within our hearts under the Christmas tree, perhaps much more than the children are able. We know that God's goodness will once again draw near. We think of all of God's goodness that came our way last year and sense something of this marvelous home. Jesus comes in judgment and grace: "Behold I stand at the door! Open wide the gates!" (Ps. 24:7)?

One day, at the last judgment, he will separate the sheep and the goats and will say to those on his right: "Come, you blessed. I was hungry and you fed me." (Matt. 25:34). To the astonished question of when and where, he answered: "What you did to the least of these, you have done to me?" (Matt. 25:40).

*What emotions or thoughts are coming up for you right now?*

*What have you been taught about God's judgement? About God's grace?*

With that we are faced with the shocking reality: Jesus stands at the door and knocks, in complete reality. He asks you for help in the form of a beggar, in the form of a ruined human being in torn clothing. He confronts you in every person that you meet. Christ walks

on the earth as your neighbor as long as there are people. He walks on the earth as the one through whom God calls you, speaks to you and makes his demands. That is the greatest seriousness and the greatest blessedness of the Advent message. Christ stands at the door. He lives in the form of the person in our midst. Will you keep the door locked or open it to him? Christ is still knocking...Learn to wait, because he has promised to come. "I stand at the door." We call to him: "Yes, come soon, Lord Jesus!"

*Where do you sense Christ standing at the door, still knocking? Where does these words of Jesus become real for you? What is Bonhoeffer's challenge to us today? What will you remember about these words of Bonhoeffer? If you lived in the truths of these sermons for the next week, how would your life be different?*

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