

Reflection Isaiah 53:1-8

Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Disciple, Martyr

April 2nd, 2025

Almost exactly 80 years ago, on April 9th, 1945, German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed by hanging – mere days before the allied forces reached Berlin and the Nazi regime collapsed. Bonhoeffer was 39 years old.

The day before, April 8th (which happened to be the first Sunday after Easter in 1945), Bonhoeffer led worship at Buchenwald Concentration Camp – the place he had spent imprisoned the last two months - for one last time. And he allegedly preached on the words we just heard – words about the unnamed servant of God who is suffering unjustly. I say allegedly because there are few eye witness accounts about Bonhoeffer's last days. And some of those we have were manipulated, usually by the perpetrators of violence, who wanted to make themselves look better.

Now I am wondering if Bonhoeffer really preached about Isaiah 53. Why would he have chosen this text for the Easter season, a season of new life and hope? Isaiah 53 with all its mention of injustice, suffering, and even death, is a text much more suitable for the season we are in right now, the season of Lent. Not coincidentally, Isaiah 53 is one of those texts of the Hebrew Scriptures that has been interpreted by Christians in the light of Jesus' suffering and death.

The words about the servant of God who suffers unjustly also seem to fit a little too well as we look at Dietrich Bonhoeffer's fate. For he died at the hands of an unjust regime, without a proper trial, as he consequently – but not necessarily fearlessly - lived according to his faith in a merciful and compassionate God through what he said and did, trying to defy the forces of evil and death he experienced all around him - knowing that it most likely would get him into trouble.

On the other hand: Bonhoeffer knew that there is no resurrection, no new life, no new beginning, without the cross, without death. And so, maybe, he saw Isaiah 53 as an appropriate text to preach on – after all, he was preaching to people imprisoned in an extermination camp, people who witnessed unjust suffering and death every day (and who themselves suffered unjustly under inhumane

conditions), people who hoped against all hope that they somehow would make it out alive – that there was a new life waiting for them beyond the trauma and terror they experienced. Maybe Bonhoeffer chose this text as an acknowledgment of the suffering of his fellow inmates. Maybe he himself found some comfort in those words.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a multi-faceted and fascinating character. He grew up as one of 8 children in a privileged and highly educated Protestant family. From an early age, he expressed the desire to become a theologian, much to the ridicule of his brothers. He wrote his first dissertation at age 21; his second when he was 23. He enjoyed the intellectual wrestling with the tenets of faith and excelled at it.

Then, in 1930, when he was only 24 years old, he was invited to lecture at Union Seminary in New York City. Now according to his own words, Bonhoeffer wasn't too impressed with the depth of theology taught at Union. However, the year he spent in New York changed his perspective and his life. For here he encountered the African American community, mostly in Harlem. He experienced the racism against these siblings in Christ – and he experienced the deep spirituality of the African American community. Before moving to New York City, the 'theology of the cross', which focusses on the suffering of Christ, was mostly an abstract concept for Bonhoeffer – after all, he lived a sheltered and privileged life – but here, it became alive, as he saw the suffering of Christ in the suffering of the Black community. It prepared him for things to come.

For fascism was on the rise in Europe, and especially in Germany. After the elections in 1933, the Nazis under Adolf Hitler emerged as the strongest political party. And it took the Nazis only a few months to dismantle democracy by evoking obscure laws, firing anyone who wasn't towing the party line, and instead placing Nazi party hardliners in positions of political, administrative, and military power. This authoritarian rule was cemented through the styling of Hitler as God's elect - a Messiah-like figure -, relentless propaganda, the sowing of mistrust, scapegoating, threats and bullying, physical attacks, the 'disappearing' of people, imprisonments, book burning, the banning of any art that was deemed 'un-German', and the occasional assassination. Those were only the portents of more horrifying things yet to come.

These fascist tactics also effected the Protestant Church in Germany – pastors, bishops, and theologians who dared speak up against the new government and the idolization of Adolf Hitler were either bullied into submission, or defrocked, or imprisoned. Not that a lot of Protestant leaders spoke up – the majority fell in line with the Nazis and their policies. This majority was known as the ‘German Christians’, a nationalist church movement that predates Nazi rule and thrived once Hitler assumed power.

However, there was a counter movement. Already in 1934 (seeing the handwriting on the wall), some of the leading theologians of the day, including Karl Barth and Martin Niemoeller (the latter being famous for his quote, ‘First they came for... the socialists, the union trade leaders, the Jews’) , came together in the German city of Wuppertal - Barmen and drafted a theological declaration – denying Hitler’s claim to be God’s elect to whom absolute adoration and obedience is due, and promoting a church that seeks to live the teachings of Jesus Christ, who is the only Lord of our life. Bonhoeffer was one of the signers of the Barmen Theological Declaration. This declaration started the Protestant Movement of the so-called ‘Confessing Church’.

Bonhoeffer became one of the central leaders of this **protesting** Protestant movement. He founded a Confessing Church seminary in 1935. However, it was declared illegal and closed by the Gestapo, the German secret police, only two years later. 27 students and pastors were arrested.

Bonhoeffer continued his faithful resistance work – he created an underground ‘seminary on the run’, teaching young men throughout the Eastern parts of the German Reich. Needless to say, he was on the Gestapo’s radar screen: in 1938, he was banned from entering Berlin. During these precarious times, friends and colleagues in New York City arranged for him to come to the U.S. and once again teach at Union Seminary in 1939 – they tried to save him from harassment in Germany. Bonhoeffer accepted the invitation – but the moment he stepped off the boat in New York City, he felt remorse. He felt that he didn’t belong in New York City, that his presence and his voice were needed back in Germany. He stayed only two weeks before returning home. Shortly after his return to Germany, he was prohibited from speaking in public. In 1941, he was also forbidden to print or publish any writings.

By then, Germany was at war. The mass deportations and mass murder of Jews, political opponents, mentally and physically disabled people, people we today call LGBTQ+, and other 'undesirable elements', had started. Bonhoeffer at that point felt that his faith called him to more radical action. He was a pacifist and against any form of violence. At the same time, he realized that inaction in the name of non-violence would not save him from being complicit in evil; no matter what he did or didn't do, he'd be guilty. So he resolved to follow his conscience and 'sin boldly', as Martin Luther famously advised back in the 16th century - and entrust himself to the grace of God. So he became involved with a group of military insiders, seeking to undermine Hitler's regime – one of his brothers-in-law happened to be part of that group as well. And I'm not getting into that story, or we'd be here all night.

In 1943, Bonhoeffer was implicated in the actions of a group that helped 14 Jewish people escape Germany – and consequently was imprisoned in Berlin. For one and a half years, he was awaiting trial. This experience threatened to break his spirit – in his poem, 'Who Am I?', he writes:

(I am) 'Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
Struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat.
Yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
Thirsting for words of kindness, for human touch,
Seething with anger about random acts of cruelty and petty words meant to demean,
Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
Faint, and ready to give up.'

However, throughout his struggles, he managed to hold on to his faith – and, whenever he was able, prayed and worshiped with his fellow prisoners, but also his jailors. Some sympathetic prison guards helped smuggle uncensored letters to Bonhoeffer's family and friends out of prison. One guard even offered to help him escape – but Bonhoeffer feared for the safety of his family and friends and declined, putting their safety and well-being over his own.

In February 1945, Bonhoeffer was disappeared – he was transferred to an undisclosed location, which turned out to be the Buchenwald Concentration Camp, an extermination camp. All communication between Bonhoeffer and his family and friends ceased. On April 4th, diaries of a high-ranking military officer involved in several plots to assassinate Adolph Hitler were discovered. Bonhoeffer's name was mentioned, among many others. Even though the Nazi regime was about to collapse – the allied forces were already at Berlin's gates - , Hitler in a rage ordered the execution of all those implicated, including Bonhoeffer. After he was hastily court-marshalled and hanged, Bonhoeffer's naked body most likely was burnt in a pile with the bodies of others who were executed. His family didn't learn about his death for several months.

The Nazis tried to erase Bonhoeffer's memory, but it lived on – through his martyrdom – and, just as a side note, the original meaning of 'martyr' is simply witness - his writings, his teachings – and his willingness to faithfully follow the God of mercy, compassion, and life in the face of evil (which he often found expressed through indifference) and death.

There are many words he wrote and spoke that still ring true in our world today, words that defy a kind of Christianity that is too comfortable, too established, too risk-adverse, too quick to align with the political powers that be. But the following words, preached to a group of young people on the day of their confirmation in an 'underground' church in 1938, challenge me in a special way these days:

"Your 'yes' to God requires your 'no' to all injustice, to all evil, to all lies, to all oppression and violation of the weak and the poor..."

Which brings us back to Isaiah 53. Yes, there has always been unjust suffering, and it continues to this day. Evil and sin are alive and well in this world. But this is not God's will. God's will and vision is a realm where injustice and need and mourning and crying and death are no more. A realm where we have life to the fullest as we are reconciled with God and with one another. A realm where we say 'no' to all life-defying forces as we say 'yes' to the God of life.

May God grant us all a Spirit of protest against all evil and forces of death we experience around us today. And may God give us courage to actively and consequently live our faith – the kind of courage we see in Dietrich Bonhoeffer – a man who wasn't perfect (who is?), but who put his trust in God, who wrestled

with God and his conscience, and did as best as he could – as a pastor, disciple,
martyr. Amen