

SERMON- Advent 3 (C)
Charles R. Cowherd

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Philippians 4:4-7

St. Timothy's (Herndon)
December 15, 2024

Luke 3:7-18

Canticle 9

OPENING:

In 1933, two days after Adolph Hitler had seized power in Germany... Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran priest and theologian, delivered a radio sermon, criticizing the regime and warning his country about the danger of the Führer.

Here was a voice crying in the wilderness, yelling at the top of his lungs, “You Brood of Vipers”—chastising the Nazi Party and the people that would encourage and allow Hitler to do what he did.

Mysteriously, during that radio transmission, Bonhoeffer’s voice was cut off midway and the radio feed stopped. Whether it was censorship or a technological malfunction, no one ever heard his final statement, no one heard that prophet make his Advent warning.¹

Bonhoeffer would spend the next 12 years of his life, sounding that call, speaking out against the Government and criticizing the Church for its complacency. For those efforts, Bonhoeffer would be executed, hung, in 1945 just days before Germany’s surrender.

ADVENT

Today is *Gaudete* Sunday, the moment in Advent where we “rejoice.” Historically, it was the half-way point in what used to be six weeks of Advent, mirroring Lent, and *its* six weeks of penitence. Advent 3 is the moment where our preparation turns from purple/ blue to pink. So, this is *supposed* to be our “break” within the long prep to Christmas.

John the Baptist’s words don’t seem to be particularly joyful, however. They do not seem like much of a break. Instead, today’s lesson ends up being a kind of tough “downer” meal between the Thanksgiving and the Christmas feasts.

This close to Christmas, it goes without saying, no one wants to be chastised by John the Baptist, no preacher wants to preach this text and, it goes without saying, no congregation wants to hear it.²

¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 2012. *‘God Is in the Manger’: Reflections on Advent and Christmas*. Jana Riess (ed.). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox. IX-X.

² Beach-Verhey, Kathy. 2009. “Homiletical Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word* (Year C, Volume 1) Louisville, KY: Westminster Knox, 69.

But here we are.

BONHOEFFER

I started with Bonhoeffer because there is new movie out about his life but ALSO, next Sunday, we are going to again do our Advent Christmas Hymn Festival with Readings from Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

We did this two years ago and so you might remember it, and our choir has also been doing various pieces from the Hymn Festival over the last three Sundays.

I won't preach at that service next week, so I have to get this in now: next week's service will be another example of a jarring Advent wakeup call, an alarm bell going off in the middle of your "normally scheduled programming." For Advent IV, right before Christmas, we will have this strange and beautiful service.

It will be haunting and thought-provoking, soul-provoking.

We won't celebrate Communion, it will be a sort of a Eucharistic fast prior to the Arrival of the Christ Child for Christmas.

Now if you prefer, you can always come to the 8 AM where a normal sermon will be delivered and the Body and Bread will be offered.

But I should not have to tell you the quality of the music that will be here for you at 10 AM, and how coupled with skillful readings from Bonhoeffer... that it will be a most appropriate way to complete your Advent journey.

Okay, COMMERCIAL OVER

During his short life, Dietrich Bonhoeffer spent some time in the United States, he studied in New York City, but also travelled a bit, even driving down Route 11 through the Shenandoah Valley.

He went to New Orleans in his twenties... he did not really like it, like his kindred spirit John the Baptist, it wasn't for him.

Amazingly, Bonhoeffer was only 27 years old when he spoke against Hitler in that radio message. He would then start an underground seminary during World War II. Like John the Baptist, he would do his work from the perspective of the wilderness.

JOHN the BAPTIST:

John's message this morning is as untamed as the prophet that speaks it. It's this mixture of exhortation and criticism and irony and warning and self-effacement.³

³ Avram, Wesley D. 2009. "Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting on the Word* (Year C, Volume 1) Louisville, KY: Westminster Knox, 68.

He talks about stones and snakes and soldiers and coats and wheat. It's tough to read so we have the same question as the crowds have in the story: "What should we do then?" They ask it 3x's: "what should we do?" In other words, they are saying: 'stop yelling at us and give us some practical instructions.'

John the Baptist follows suit; he obliges and actually gives rather sensible advice about tax collection and giving out of abundance and he even talks about the military and doing that profession honorably.

He does not call people to live his wilderness life, grow a beard and wear a loincloth. He does not say "quit the Army"... and let's head to the desert to do some version of Communism in the wilderness.

Instead, he says that you need to do your jobs with honesty and truth and justice. He says that is how we can improve the world that we live in. In fact, his moral advice could be from any religion and any positive well-meaning philosophy.

The crowds LOVE him for that. They love the ethical and moral instructions that they get from him. They say to each other: "This guy... he could be the real deal, maybe he is the Messiah. He could be the one we have longed for, the one who will overthrow Rome and get us right with God through our own improved moral effort."

John is at a crossroads... the temptation is right there, he could pass the cup along and receive their praise and become the hero but **INSTEAD**...

he tells them to wake up, he replies in only the way that John the Baptist can, he says: "Sorry I am going to have stop you there, but I am not the Messiah. "Far from it."

"The Messiah is going to roll in here and he is not going to give you bread & butter advice about tax brackets."

"He is not going to work on how you can polish your resumes, or lose 15 pounds, or perform a social service."

"He is going to come with Holy Spirit and the Fire."

You can imagine the crowds saying: "let's go back to the part about coats and money and.... That part we can get behind."

John instead ends by talking about FIRE and wheat and the threshing floor. That sort of talk is going to get John the Baptist killed, just like it gets his cousin Jesus killed, just like it will get his spiritual descendant Dietrich Bonhoeffer killed.

BONHOEFFER REDUX:

Bonhoeffer had that chance too.

He could have taken the easy way out.

Early in his life he was tempted by the idea of connecting his faith with German nationalism—a temptation felt across history in that country and others.⁴

The universities did exactly that and became bastions of Nazi propaganda, The Church in places rolled over, there is the famous image of the swastika on a pulpit in a church in Germany.

Bonhoeffer cast his lot against the prevailing winds of the day and stood up in the pulpit, and with his pen, and ultimately with his life:

Bonhoeffer *could* have given good advice about how to be a Christian, a good citizen, how to succeed in this world.

Instead Bonhoeffer preached about “peace—a Peace (that) must be dared.”⁴

Instead he wrote that: “To speak faithfully of Jesus Christ and to obey his teachings is to embrace the idea of ‘God who was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn.’”⁵

about “a wandering Christ, *Christ incognito*, that serves the poor”⁶

about “The world is a wilderness that we must wander, and there is no escape, other than Jesus Christ meeting us as friend and stranger.”

about how the need to “follow Jesus is to live in exile, like Israel’s diaspora, for Christ’s body is broken and scattered.”⁷

“For the great and powerful of this world, there are only two places in which their courage fails them, of which they are afraid deep down in their souls, from which they shy away. These are the manger and the cross of Jesus Christ. No powerful person dares to approach the manger; and this even includes King Herod.”⁸

CONCLUSION.

Bonhoeffer loved Advent/ loved Christmas.

He said that “Life in a prison cell may well be compared to Advent” – waiting for a

⁴ Marsh Charles. 2015. *‘Strange Glory’: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. New York: Knopf, 213-214.

⁵ Marsh, 171.

⁶ Marsh, 117-118

⁷ Marsh 255.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, 26.

knock on the door that will come from the outside.

The know would never come, not in his earthly life but in the last year of his lift he wrote a letter to his parents saying that all the lights from previous Christmas will help him survive this “dark Christmas.”⁹

In the end, he would spend his time in prison, asking the same questions that John the Baptist did. Who is this Jesus? What are my responsibilities in this world?

John would end his life in prison too, once sending out a call to his disciples and Jesus saying: is it true? Is he the messiah?

That question echoes across the centuries for them and for us.

The answer is that old and tired and true refrain:

“the call of salvation of believing Christians: ‘For a Child has been born for us, a son given to us.’”¹⁰

AMEN

⁹ Ibid. 15

¹⁰ Ibid. 11