

Reflecting on Faith and Hope in Hard Times

How can we learn to keep our faith and hope alive in hard time? We are in such times today with the world shutting down because of a small unseen virus that causes Covid-19. Shelter in place reduces outside relationships to contacts mediated through technology. Food stores are being stripped of necessities. The future seems very uncertain. How is our faith and hope manifest in such a situation? We are not the first humans to find ourselves isolated in a time of crisis. There is a long list of Christians who have been isolated in hard times, often in prisons for their activities. Their writings provide insight and guidance from someone who has gone before.

One such example is Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

I.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran theologian who lived and died during the Second World War. Bonhoeffer was one of the founders of the Confessing Church that went underground and resisted Hitler. He taught at an underground seminary. His public actions were restricted (no speaking or publishing). Although a pacifist, he worked with the underground while a part of the German intelligence. He was imprisoned in 1943. His boss, Dohnányi was involved in the assassination attempt of Hitler. The plot on Hitler failed. Documents discovered implicated Bonhoeffer in the assassination attempt. After the failed attempt Bonhoeffer was court-martialed in a sham trial, and was hung on April 9, 1945.

The following are excerpts of Bonhoeffer's letters to his close friend Eberhard Bethge. Eberhard was himself implicated in the plot to assassinate Hitler, but was rescued by Soviet troops before his trial. On July 21, 1944, the day after the failed attempt at Hitler's assassination, he writes from jail about Christian faith.

"During the last year or so I've come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is not a *homo religiosus*, but simply a man, as Jesus was a man - in contrast, shall we say, to John the Baptist. I don't mean the shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the busy, the comfortable, or the lascivious, but the profound this worldliness, characterized by discipline and the constant knowledge of death and resurrection. I think Luther lived a this-worldly life in this sense.

I remember a conversation that I had in America thirteen years ago with a young French pastor. We were asking ourselves quite simply what we wanted to do with our lives. He said he would like to become a saint (and I think it's quite likely that he did become one). At the time I was very impressed, but I disagreed with him, and said, in effect, that I should like to learn to have faith. For a long time I didn't realize the depth of the contrast. I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life, or something like it. I suppose I wrote *The Cost of Discipleship* as the end of that path. Today I can see the dangers of that book, though I still stand by what I wrote.

I discovered later, and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. One must completely abandon any attempt to make

something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman (a so-called priestly type!), a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings~ but those of God in the world- watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; that is *metanoia*; and that is how one becomes a man and a Christian (cf Jer. 45 !). How can success make us arrogant, or failure lead us astray, when we share in God's sufferings through a life of this kind?¹

Here are some questions you might want to reflect on as you reread the passages.

- 1) What does Bonhoeffer mean by "faith"? How does this compare with your understanding of faith?
- 2) Bonhoeffer wants to learn how to have faith. He searches for that learning by being immersed within the world, and ultimately from a jail cell. What would it mean to abandon your aspirations in this time and live "unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities"? Is there an aspiration you are willing to set aside for now so you can immerse yourself in the present, in the middle of the Corona-19 pandemic? How could that teach you something about faith?
- 3) Bonhoeffer references Jeremiah 45:

"The word that the prophet Jeremiah spoke to Baruch son of Neriah, when he wrote these words in a scroll at the dictation of Jeremiah, in the fourth year of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah: Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, to you, O Baruch: You said, "Woe is me! The LORD has added sorrow to my pain; I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest." Thus you shall say to him, "Thus says the LORD: I am going to break down what I have built, and pluck up what I have planted-- that is, the whole land. And you, do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them; for I am going to bring disaster upon all flesh, says the LORD; but I will give you your life as a prize of war in every place to which you may go." ." (NRSV)

Jeremiah is written in a time of extreme hardship as Israel stops being a nation and is taken into captivity. Israel's world is to be permanently changed, as was Germany's. The path to transformation of Israel is through exile. The path to Germany's present was through defeat. What does it mean if our future is through this experience to something new, not a return to "normalcy?" How might that change your experience of this crisis? How might you follow Jesus through the crisis?

II. A few days later Bonhoeffer writes again to Bethge on hope:

*"I've now finished *Memoirs from the House of the Dead*. It contains a great deal that is wise and good. I'm still thinking about the assertion, which in his case is certainly not a mere conventional dictum, that man cannot live without hope, and that men who have really lost all hope often become wild and wicked. It may be an open question whether in this case hope = illusion. The importance of illusion to one's life should certainly not be underestimated; but for a Christian there must be hope based on a firm foundation. And if even illusion has so much power in people's lives that it*

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer *From Letters & Papers from Prison: The Enlarged Version* ed. Eberhard Bethge A touchstone book © 1971. Pages 369-370 Bold type added.

can keep life moving, how great a power there is in a hope that is based on certainty, and how invincible a life with such a hope is. 'Christ our hope'- this Pauline formula is the strength of our lives."²

- 4) What do you mean by "hope?" Does hope require evidence? Does hope require something to be hopeful for? Read Hebrews 11:1 and Romans 8:24-25. Write a short paragraph giving your understanding of "hope."
- 5) What is the "firm foundation" that Bonhoeffer sees as the grounding of hope? Remember this is written in Jail. How does your understanding of hope compare with Bonhoeffer's use in the second reading? Does your understanding of hope provide a firm foundation for life within a pandemic?
- 6) What illusions are present in your life and directing your "hopes"?

III.

Bonhoeffer also wrote poetry. The following poem gives us insight into the inner life of Bonhoeffer.

WHO AM I?
By Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a squire from his country-house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I would talk to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I would bear the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know of myself,
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my
throat,
yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness,
trembling with anger at despotisms and petty humiliation,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,

² Ibid 347-348

weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.³

7) How is Bonhoeffer's poem *Who am I* reflected in your life? What "masks" do you wear that prevent others from seeing your: doubts, fears, and conflicts. Try and answer Bonhoeffer's question "Who are you?"

Conclusion

Faith and hope do not require us to be superhuman; we still have doubt, internal conflict, fears, and wishing for it all to end. The idea that faith and hope somehow magically eliminate doubt and fears can be spiritually deadly. It can install a belief that we are displeasing Jesus, or worse, that somehow we are not worthy of being Christian. It can cause us to hide behind a mask. In times of adversity we need to acknowledge; our fears, the challenges to our faith, a feeling of helplessness, and worse, a feeling of hopelessness. We cannot address that which is not acknowledged. Take some time to acknowledge the challenges your face. Pray that we, like Bonhoeffer will learn how to have faith not by withdrawing from the world, but by engaging the world.

Oh and one more thing -- Wash your hands.

³ Ibid pg 347-348