

By Gracious Powers

March 6, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

Texts: Luke 4: 1-13

Friends, on this first Sunday in Lent, in this moment of such sadness and anxiety in our wider world, I'd like to begin today by circling back to the hymn we just sang – *By Gracious Powers* – and to the World War II-era story of its origin. I hope it might offer grounding and courage. If it's not already in your bulletins, please feel free to pull it out again and take another look. It's Hymn 100. Like some of you, I've sung and cherished these words so many times that I know them by heart. Their abiding faith in the face of fear and turmoil have been a balm for me in solitary moments of personal duress, confusion, loneliness, and pain. At the same time, we've learned together that these words have a remarkable capacity to hold and lift our hearts together in times of shared grief and collective crisis. I pray this is the case today.

Some of you know the story already. The lyrics were first a poem penned in prison by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and an anti-Nazi dissident. Several years into World War II, given his academic credentials and global ecumenical contacts, the German resistance found a role for Bonhoeffer working undercover as a German military intelligence officer. He served as an official courier, traveling to Norway, Finland, and Sweden, all the while sharing critical details about Nazi plans and intentions with Western Allies. He helped German Jews escape to Switzerland and was part of several circles actively plotting against Hitler. He was arrested and imprisoned in 1943. 18 months later, in December, 1944 and from a Gestapo jail cell in Berlin, he wrote and sent the poem to his fiancé Maria von Wedemeyer, along with these words of introduction: “a few verses that occurred to me the last evenings”..... “as a Christmas greeting for you and the parents and siblings.”

Bonhoeffer's lines convey a deeply personal, even intimate, connection with his beloved and his family, yet they also carry an almost prescient awareness of the grave situation that he and the wider world was facing. By that time, he surely knew he was unlikely to see Maria again and that he would be executed. He was hung in a Nazi concentration camp just four months later. I came across another translation this week that gave the first line even more meaning. We know “Von guten Mächten,” as *By Gracious Powers*, as in, “By gracious powers, so wonderfully sheltered and confidently waiting come what may.” A German translator, Hilmer Werner, suggests instead: “By loving forces....” “By loving forces, silently surrounded, I feel quite soothed, secure, and filled with grace.”

Both translations are stunning. And yet it all leaves me to wonder, how, from a Nazi prison of all places, does one begin to conjure and reframe one's circumstances with the kind of faith, confidence, and fortitude that Bonhoeffer's poem so powerfully conveys? Allow me to stay with Bonhoeffer's words a bit longer. He continues in verse two: “Yet is this heart by its old foe tormented, still evil days bring burdens hard to bear. O give our frightened souls the sure salvation, for which O God you taught us to prepare.”

It wasn't until this week that it even dawned on me that “this old foe” about which he was writing may well have been a veiled reference to Hitler, his captor. After all, Hitler's name would have been familiar to Germans for almost 20 years by that point. “Yet is this heart but it's old foe tormented.” It's more

than possible. Whatever the case, I've assumed that the "old foe" was a poetic nod to *the* enemy, or the devil, as in the one who appears in our passage for today.

One more piece of background on Bonhoeffer before we briefly turn to that text from Luke. I can't help but wonder if Bonhoeffer had something more specific in mind, too, when he mentioned preparation. "O give our frightened souls the sure salvation, for which you taught us to prepare." One could say Bonhoeffer devoted his life up until that point to the work of spiritual preparation and formation. Several years before his imprisonment, the Gestapo had shut down a seminary where he was teaching but not before he wrote a beautiful book about his experience there, called "Life Together." The book recorded wisdom gleaned from what he considered an experiment living in an intentional Christian community there with his students and priests in training. In it, he articulates a simple, joy-filled yet ordered way of living one's days. It includes instruction to set aside time each week for solitude, and time for community, as well as time for morning reading, meditation, and intercessory prayer. Bonhoeffer made a point of reading scripture daily, and not just reading it but *listening* to it, listening for, "confidently waiting" even for God's word to come alive for him. This was more than a matter of personal or even vocational interest for him. He could sense the rise of far-right Nationalism Socialism all around him. Of course, he was terrified by what he saw, much like we are frightened by what we see arising here and abroad. And so, he committed himself all the more to learning and teaching how to spiritually prepare himself and others, such that they could together face the evil days that he knew were already bearing down.

All of this brings me to Lent and to our classic First Sunday of Lent text of Jesus' time of trial in the desert wilderness. For what is Lent, and what was that season in Jesus' life just before he begins his public ministry, if not a time of preparation, for Jesus and for us! In Lent, we prepare to face unflinchingly the inevitable facts of our human existence as embodied by Jesus' own human journey—the loneliness and solitude of it, the anger, the sorrow, the suffering, and death itself, yet also the profound courage, compassion, companionship, trust, and empire-defying love! I invite us to begin the season today with reflection, now and after church, about the role of loneliness and solitude for Jesus and us. After all, Jesus' 40 days, that lonesome journey as the old gospel tune goes, begins there. And, I wonder if we can all relate a bit given the lonely wilderness of Covid we are still coming through, stuck as we've been in these quarantined celled quasi realities we've been living for so long. Some have been tempted to fill their time with self or home improvement projects. Others have languished in those ever-tempting distractions of overwork, overindulgence or both! Yet, with Jesus and Bonhoeffer, I wonder if this hasn't been a time for us all to come to terms with what is perhaps the most profound temptation of them all: the illusion of self-reliance.

We don't have much of a record of Jesus' private thoughts for those 40 days, but Bonhoeffer echoes the sentiment in another of his poems from prison. See if you can relate, at least to the first half of these lines of his:

*O God, early in the morning I cry to you.
Help me to pray
And to concentrate my thoughts on you:
I cannot do this alone.
In me there is darkness,
But with you there is light;
I am lonely, but you do not leave me;*

*I am feeble in heart, but with you there is help;
I am restless, but with you there is peace.
In me there is bitterness, but with you there is patience;
I do not understand your ways,
But you know the way for me...
Restore me to liberty,
And enable me to live now
That I may answer before you and before me.
Lord, whatever this day may bring,
Your name be praised.
Amen.*

Lonely, feeble, restless, bitter, ready for some liberty to be restored? Anyone know the feeling? Who's with me? The devil knew Jesus would be feeling it, that he was especially vulnerable to temptation in the wilderness all by my himself. He was all alone there for 40 days, without even a cellmate or a guard. And the devil clearly wanted Jesus to lean hard into himself, into his God-given power, to be self-reliant and so to cast off his reliance on God.

The devil went after the pain of Jesus' loneliness, and surely it was there. He was human. How could it not be? But I imagine he and Bonhoeffer recalled a wisdom we barely realize. That there is a difference between loneliness and solitude. Paul Tillich puts it this way: "Loneliness is the pain of being alone. Solitude is the glory of being alone!" For people of deep faith, people who have spent time preparing, that glory of solitude kicks in, often in great relief, when we realize we are never truly alone, and that we were never meant to go it alone, that despite our high anxieties and high maintenance ways, God will provide, always. God will provide! God will always give us all the strength and nourishment we need. Forget about bread. Jesus, and Bonhoeffer, had God's everlasting word and promise of love that bears all things and endures all things. These aren't easy realizations come to, but... when we can "give up" and even surrender our needs for comfort, security, control, and answers, when we can remove ourselves from the center, that's when we can let God in Christ fill that space, and as Kate said last week, invade our hearts! That's when we can realize that despite whatever the enemy's efforts to occupy our souls, and they are legion, there are those loving forces that have been silently surrounding us all along. And from *that* space, we can move into a more genuine experience of intentional community, one that is not simple about filling our needs, or for that matter its own needs, but it is about living in communion, together alone and alone together, in utter reliance on God and each other, knowing we can never do it or solve it or fix it all by ourselves. I like to think that many of us have learned something, maybe even a great deal, about all this through the pandemic, by virtue of necessity, and over Zoom no less! Still, that illusion of self-reliance is a mighty beast!

Indeed, we need Lent's reminder and invitation to center our lives in God's love and

word, and in the ways of Jesus, our center, our peace. Through holy reading, meditation and prayer, through time in solitude *and* time in community, we too can prepare ourselves to more gracefully accept that we aren't alone when we face those "what ifs" of life. For what if the old foes continue to torment us, right to the end? Then what? What happens when the devil returns at that "opportune time?" What if evil days *keep* bringing burdens hard to bear? What if we were to accept that the climate crisis isn't going away... that the pandemic and the rise of uber-wealthy autocrats have changed us forever...that

our loved ones won't always be there for us...that we ourselves will one day die? Then what? Are we ready? Are we getting there? Are we even working on it? If you answered no to any of these questions, then it's all the more reason why we need to follow Jesus and Bonhoeffer's lead, why we need to this ongoing work of spiritual preparation.

If this seems a stretch, especially the idea of centering your life in Christ, say, if you aren't there yet and maybe you need a non-Christian example, just look at Zelensky! We might well wonder what prepared him. Something surely did! The man's a vision of courage in the face of violence and daily threats upon his life! He's not unlike Parks, Havel, Mandela, Malala, or Bonhoeffer, and it is utterly astonishing to see it in real-time! Born a non-religious Soviet Jew, leading Ukraine from the battlefield, unifying global allies against a proven despot, tweeting from secret bunkers: "Even if you destroy all our Ukrainian cathedrals and churches, you will not destroy our faith, our sincere belief in Ukraine and God, belief in people." And did you hear what he followed that with: "We will rebuild every single house, every single street, every single city. And we are telling Russia – learn the words 'reparations' and 'contributions'. You will pay back fully to us for what you've done against our state, against our every single Ukrainian." Not retribution. Not bloody vengeance! But repair and restoration, this during a week of at least three failed assassination attempts on his life. The man speaks truth like a prophet! He has the conviction of hope that justice and peace will one day persevere! What was his spiritual preparation we might wonder? Years of laughing as a comedian, a deeply ingrained sense of the what Cornel West would call the "tragi-comic" nature of existence? Or was it practicing the part as an artist and actor? Was it being the son of Holocaust survivors, or his however secular Jewish upbringing that instilled in him a moral compass that never turns off?

Fortunately, we don't have to be such a hero. We don't have to be to Bonhoeffer. And we can't be Jesus. We do need to practice though, and we do need spiritual preparation, more than anything else! Indeed, we are called to live a "life together," in solitude and here in community. Interested in learning more about how? Why not join us after church for a discussion on these themes. Or join one of our weekly small group bible studies or prayer groups. Maybe check out Bonhoeffer's book, *Life Together*! Even simpler, take a photo or copy with you today of this extraordinary hymn and meditate on it each morning! Try it for a week. Then two. See if you can make it to 40! May its words, and God's word, help to ground and orient us all in knowledge that we are never alone, that we are always, always held by loving forces, silently surrounding. Amen.