

April 6, 2025

Philippians 3:4b–14: *If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to lay hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

This coming Wednesday, on April 9th, it will be 80 years since the Nazis executed Dietrich Bonhoeffer at the age of 39. It is reported that when he was led to the gallows he said to his fellow prisoners: *“This is the end— but for me it is the beginning of life!”* The German theologian and pastor who was critical of Hitler and the Nazi regime, remained rooted to his faith in turbulent and very troubling times right up to the end.

In the light of all that is happening now in our world I want to share with you some of Bonhoeffer’s life and thoughts because they are relevant more than ever. And I want to ask the question — how are we, as Christians, called to live and respond in these times?

I was born in the early 70’s. I grew up hearing stories of WWII, but they seemed like ancient history. I also had this feeling of *‘Thank goodness I wasn’t born in the dark ages!’* That would never happen today. This was a classic distancing — nothing like what happened in Germany in the 30’s and 40’s could possibly happen

today and to me, because we were so much more enlightened.

But then Donald Trump gets elected for the second time and passes a huge number of executive orders — more in three months than some Presidents do their entire term — and many of these are in violation of the constitution and are being challenged in the courts — but the sheer volume of them makes it hard to keep him in check.

The Trump presidency has a lot of the hallmarks of the rise of fascism that we saw in Nazi Germany and in Mussolini's Italy — a heightened and radical nationalism, the attempts to subvert checks and balances like the judiciary system, being critical of (and in some cases shutting out) the press, as well as interfering with free speech in universities. If you think this is rhetoric, the guy who literally wrote the book on fascism is moving to Canada. A Yale professor, Jason Stanley, who wrote the book *How Fascism Works* and who is an expert on fascism, has accepted a job at U of T (and a huge pay cut to go with it) because he believes the US is at risk of becoming a "fascist dictatorship".

Germany, like many other countries in Europe was a wealthy, highly educated, democratic (newly democratic), progressive country until World War 1 changed that. Germany in the 20's and 30's was economically crippled by the Treaty of Versailles, which made Germany pay for the war. The treaty was deliberately punitive and humiliating. Inflation was out of control. Along with all the other countries in Europe, they had lost so many young men to the war, and we can only imagine some of the PTSD that existed among those who survived. It was in this context that a new guy emerged on the scene (who was very charismatic) by the name of Adolf Hitler.

He was a great speaker. Hitler had great pride for the nation and instilled in his listeners that nationalism, plus a belief that they could make Germany as great as it once was and even better. Some of his plans and policies emerged over time and some were obvious from the start, like wanting to annex countries like Austria. His focus was also on race, and the Arian race was seen as the strongest. He was obsessed with pursuing the strong and weeding out what was weak. Enemies were named — Jews, people of different ethnic groups, queer people, disabled people, and of course anyone who opposed or was critical of the state.

This was Bonhoeffer's context. As Rob Fennell (UCC prof at AST) wrote in an article: ***"Bonhoeffer found himself in a well-educated, cultured country that turned to***

nationalism, bigotry, violence, persecution, divisiveness, corruption, and finally genocide." (Touchstone Vol 43, Feb 2025 p. 48)

The church in Germany, far from opposing what was happening, supported the Nazi party. The party represented stability and victory instead of humiliation and instability — it was popular with ordinary Germans. Most in the church saw Hitler as an answer to prayer and a fulfillment of the scriptures.

But Bonhoeffer, a young theologian, professor and pastor, was disturbed by what he saw and heard. It did not line up with the gospel of Jesus as he saw it.

Bonhoeffer was critical of Hitler from the start. He warned people against making an idol of Hitler in a radio broadcast 2 days after Hitler was elected — that broadcast was cut off part way through! He was horrified when the Nazis began identifying and rounding up Jewish people. Bonhoeffer became one of the founders of the Confessing Churches. These churches declared that Jesus was Lord, not Hitler, and were critical of the ruling party and critical of their mistreatment of Jewish people. Eventually the Nazis made the Confessing Church illegal, and so they had to go underground. They had to meet in secret.

Bonhoeffer had many contacts around the world. He had studied in the U.S. for several years and was influenced by the African American church. Later on, he served in London, England. He had an opportunity to meet with Gandhi and study his non-violent resistance movement, but he was asked to return to Germany to lead an underground seminary that would offer leadership to ministers and resistance to what was taking place. He accepted that offer.

Bonhoeffer ended up playing a small part in a plot to assassinate Hitler by using his contacts in Europe to deliver messages. This was something he was greatly conflicted about, as he firmly believed that taking a life was always wrong. But neither could he stand by and watch many, many innocent people being killed. In the end all he could do was throw himself at the mercy of God and plead forgiveness. The plot failed. Bonhoeffer was arrested, and spent over a year in prison before he was sent to a concentration camp.

Some of the things that people marvel at are that he so quickly stood against Hitler and the Nazi agenda, and that he stood up for the Jewish people at a time when there wasn't much sympathy for Jews. Even here in Canada, we turned away a ship of over 900 Jewish refugees that tried to land in the U.S. and then Canada. The ship was forced to return to Europe where over a quarter of those on board ended up

in concentration camps. Canada also interned 2300 “enemy aliens” who were mostly Jewish refugees from Austria and Germany.

Bonhoeffer didn’t lose his faith. He held firm, he pressed on, at a time of great trial.

Earlier we read a scripture from the apostle Paul who also went through huge trials, torture and imprisonment. Getting rid of what was not essential and clinging to Jesus was essential for Paul. It allowed him to *press on towards the goal*. I suggest that a deep faith is the way through our circumstances today.

In this time of great threat and instability, Bonhoeffer went deeper in his faith. He dug down until he hit bedrock and had a firm foundation on which to stand.

Rob Fennell in his article says “***Spirituality, for Bonhoeffer, was not the way out of his circumstances... Spirituality was the way through his circumstances.***” (P. 49 Touchstone vol 43 Feb 2025.) His faith was an anchor in the storm, an anchor of truth amidst a sea of lies. Even for himself. Bonhoeffer believed that people and churches should read the Bible *against* themselves as much as *for* themselves. In other words, at a time when churches and society was being deluded by a leader-demagogue, he argued that *we need to always be critiquing ourselves*. I think of those lines at the end of Psalm 139:23-24: “Search me O Lord and know my heart... see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

For Bonhoeffer, having a living faith and a daily practice of reading the scriptures and of prayer allowed him to *press on* in troubling times.

Community was also important for him. In his book *Life Together* he held up the high value of community as a responsibility for us as Christians and a divine gift. Community and relationships are not easy. They are always imperfect, but Bonhoeffer believed that Christ stands between us in our relationships. In this day and age it is important that we lean into community as a high value and calling.

Alongside this high value of community is the sense that we practice our faith with an outward perspective — with a concern for others and not just a self-preservation mentality. It was this theology, this way of being a Christian that had Bonhoeffer caring about Jewish people. It’s this theology that has us caring for refugees, for the genocide taking place against Palestinians in Gaza, for women in Afghanistan, for people being detained and deported in the U.S. and for others suffering that God calls us to see.

Bonhoeffer believed that discipleship was costly, and he saw that many churches

and Christians were exercising a 'cheap grace'. For Bonhoeffer, costly discipleship meant laying down your life, your comfort, your reputation, to follow Jesus. One of Bonhoeffer's famous quotes from his book *The Cost of Discipleship* is "**When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.**" (p. 99) For him, that meant following Jesus would change you. You could not follow Jesus and remain the same person.

Transformation would occur. It also meant that even when the risks were high and the comforts were scarce, you still go and speak and do what Jesus calls you to.

Sounds a bit like what we read in Philippians: *Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him,*

I want you to hear that while Bonhoeffer ended up a martyr, he didn't have a martyr complex. He gave it all up because faith and life in Jesus is worth giving everything up for. When you have it, there is a peace that can't be shaken, a life that can't be destroyed. Our world is going through troubling times.

It could be that the state of the world is the least of your problems because you've lost someone you loved or have received a life changing diagnosis or are in a relationship meltdown or a personal financial crisis. I want to suggest that the way through any trouble is a deep faith. I want to suggest that you look up to God who holds you, and who is very present in times of trouble, and that you look out for others.

I want to close by sharing a story that I re-heard this past week from Rev. Ottis Moss. He is the senior minister at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Ottis Moss took over as senior pastor in early 2008 when the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright retired from Trinity. You may or may not remember the big controversy that he got into. You see, Trinity was Barak Obama's church. As Obama was running for president everything was scrutinized — including Jeremiah Wright's sermons. In one sermon he was quoted saying: "*Violence begets violence. Hatred begets hatred, and terrorism begets terrorism.*" So seven years later, these words were taken to mean that Rev. Wright said **the US deserved 911!** As Ottis Moss was just beginning his time at the church, all of a sudden the media was all over Trinity Church. They had bomb threats. For an entire year, before church, they had to have the church checked for bombs.

Ottis Moss received death threats. He ended up needing security when he was outside of work or at home. Even his children got a security detail when they were at school. So one night at home, Ottis and his wife are woken up because they hear noises in the house. His wife tells him "You've got to go and check that out!" So he gets out of bed and grabs his baseball bat, preparing himself in mind and body to protect his wife and children.

It's 3:30 in the morning. After a bit of searching, he realizes that the noise is coming from his 5-year old daughter's room. When he opens the door, there she is, practicing her ballet and dancing away! She sees her dad and says "Look at me! I'm dancing!" And he stares at her. "What are you doing? It's the middle of the night! You've got to get back in bed!" But again she says "**Look at me, Daddy! I'm dancing in the dark!**" In that moment, Moss says he heard the Spirit say to him "*Look at her, look at her!*" And so he does ... and he realizes the darkness is all around her, but she's dancing. The darkness is around her but *it's not inside her*.

So after tucking her back into bed, Moss goes downstairs and rewrites his sermon for the next morning. He preaches a message to his weary congregation who were under attack, and he encourages them to dance in the dark!

What allows them to dance in the dark? It's not the outside security or outside peace, but the music they can hear coming from a deeper place. Others may not hear the music you hear, but they can see you move to the music. They can see you feeding hungry people. There is a lot of darkness in this world. When you shine, *you* are the light of the world. We are called to shine ... not out of our own strength and light, but from the Holy Spirit in us.

Prayer by Bonhoeffer:

Lord Jesus Christ, You were poor and miserable, imprisoned and abandoned as I am.

You know all human need, You remain with me when no human being stands by me,

You do not forget me and you seek me, You want me to recognize you and turn back to you.

Lord, I hear your call and follow. Help me! ...

Merciful God...

I trust in your grace and commit my life entirely into your hand...

Whether I live or die, I am with you, and you are with me, my God.