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# God is in the Manger



**Reflections at Advent  
on Bonhoeffer's Meditations**

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# Introduction

## About this Study Guide

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a pastor in Germany who became much more than that when he took on the roles of theologian, writer, ecumenist, political resister, and conspirator against the Nazi regime. He became one of the leading voices of the movement against Hitler through his decisions as a church leader, his writings as a theologian, his contacts in the ecumenical movement in Europe, and especially his commitment to helping the churches in Germany oppose Nazi oppression of the Jews and attacks against the church itself. For church people today, his life and writings show us an example of a person who met the call of his times for Christian leadership in church, ecumenical and political issues of his day.

This study guide is designed to accompany the reading of Bonhoeffer's Advent meditations, *God is in the Manger*. Assembled from his writings by editors, these brief meditations are largely pulled from his writings during his two-year imprisonment under the Nazi regime, from 1943 to the end of his life when he was hanged by the Nazi government in 1945. He was arrested and killed for his participation in the active resistance movement against Hitler from within the Nazi government itself. His writings from his imprisonment represent his mature theological and pastoral reflections and ideas that had been developing through the years as he undertook his calling with all its ramifications under the Nazi regime.

The study guide is set up in four chapters, one for each week of Advent, to accompany the four sets of weekly readings in *God is in the Manger*. In each chapter, you will find opening and closing prayers, some opening questions to introduce the theme and content of the readings, a summary of key points from the seven daily readings, a short essay that explores the themes of the readings, a suggested scripture reading from the Hebrew Bible, suggested spiritual practices, and discussion questions to encourage you to engage Bonhoeffer's thoughts more deeply. You can follow this study guide as an individual, with a study group from your congregation or online. Short videos for each week are also available to help your study. (Find the videos at [presbyterian.ca/canadian-ministries/presbyterians-read](http://presbyterian.ca/canadian-ministries/presbyterians-read).) A brief word about a few of these elements might be helpful.

## The Essays

The essays on the themes of each week's readings are intended to provide background about Bonhoeffer's life and thoughts to help you understand the importance of his writings in the daily meditations. The meditations themselves are brief but develop theological themes that open a window on Bonhoeffer's experiences and decisions as he lived out his ministry—one that was carried out almost entirely under the impact of the rise of Hitler and the Nazi government, which brought murderous oppression of Jews and others to Germany and Europe and brought the world to war in an effort to stop Hitler. That fraught and violent context must be understood to see the significance of Bonhoeffer's thoughts on the themes of Advent and to consider how his writings are significant for today's Christians.

## Scripture Readings

In providing a suggested Scripture for each week, a passage has been selected from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) that complements the theme of the week's meditations. These passages provide examples of how the themes Bonhoeffer writes about were rooted in the books of the Hebrew Bible, thus giving a sense of the scope and breadth of these themes in Scripture.

## Spiritual Practices

Throughout the four weeks of Advent, as you read and consider Bonhoeffer's *God is in the Manger*, you are invited to participate in one or more of the following spiritual practices. There will be suggestions each week to prompt your practice.

### Journal Writing

If you are a journal keeper or would like to start this practice for Advent or beyond, you can begin writing entries several times each week.

### Lectio Divina

*Lectio Divina* is an ancient Christian contemplative prayer practice. Here is a brief introduction to *Lectio Divina* from the Contemplative Society, a group in British Columbia that introduces themselves this way. "The Contemplative Society is an inclusive non-profit association that encourages a deepening of contemplative prayer based in the Christian Wisdom tradition while also welcoming and being supportive of other meditation traditions."<sup>1</sup> *Lectio Divina* can be done as an individual prayer practice or in a group.

*Lectio Divina* is a contemplative practice with its Christian roots in the Benedictine tradition. It combines slow, conscious reading of a biblical or sacred text with contemplation and silent prayer. It is meant to promote communication with God and a deeper knowledge of Christ in our lives today.

During *Lectio Divina* we put aside thoughts of studying the text. This is not the time to consider the historical or theological meanings of what we are reading. We read with a willingness to enter into text in a felt sense. The purpose of this practice is to hear, in silence, the word of God in this moment. What, through this reading, is God saying to me right now? What do I hear that helps me know what it means to walk the Christ path today?

#### **LECTIO DIVINA is divided into four movements:**

- **READ (LECTIO)** Read a small section of Scripture, or sacred text, slowly and deliberately. Read the text aloud at least twice with a slightly different emphasis each time. In the traditional Benedictine manner a passage is read four times.
- **MEDITATE (MEDITATIO)** Pay attention, ponder, allow words to penetrate your awareness through use of faculties such as imagination, senses, visualization, and feelings. Remain open to receiving a meaning rather than assigning one. What is the inner meaning of the text? What is the Holy Spirit saying to me right now?

- **PRAY (ORATIO)** Respond to the text using language and the received sense of the text to enter into silent prayer; pray in response to a stirring that arises out of interaction with the text. In a group, individuals may say aloud one or two words that have come to mind. It doesn't matter if two or more people speak at once.
- **CONTEMPLATE (CONTEMPLATIO)** Rest in silence, the presence of God, and allow what you have heard and felt to be absorbed into your being. Let go of reasoning, thinking, feeling. This is the time to rest in love and grace. Silence is the ground in which this prayer takes root.<sup>2</sup>

## Music as Spirituality

For some of us, music is one of the ways we connect with the Spirit; singing especially focuses our hearts' longings and expresses thoughts we might not otherwise be able to say. For each week of this study guide, a hymn from the PCC *Book of Praise* that fits the Bonhoeffer theme will be suggested. Some of these will be hymns familiar to you, others may be lovely new discoveries. You might get a hymnal (or look the hymn up on the web) and read the lyrics, then reflect on how this hymn adds insights to the week's study. Or, as a prelude to considering how the hymn extends your understanding, sing the suggested hymn if you know the tune or have access to a keyboard (or, even better, to a musician). Or, you can easily look up a YouTube recording on the internet to listen and read or sing along. If you are using this study guide in a group, you might sing the hymn as a part of your study session.

## Beyond Advent

You will notice that *God is in the Manger* contains meditations for the Twelve Days of Christmas (December 25 – January 6). You are invited to continue to use this guide during Christmas time, though these *extra* readings are not included in the chapters of this study guide.

## Resources

The following resources were used to prepare this study guide; you will find them noted in the study for each week, and they would be good resources for your own further study. All quotes from *God is in the Manger* are cited in parentheses within the text of each chapter.

Stephen R. Haynes and Lori Brandt Hale, *Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. [Cited as *Armchair*]

Ferdinand Schlingenseipen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2010. [Cited as *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*]

*This study guide has been prepared by the Rev. Dr. Patricia Dutcher-Walls, retired Hebrew Bible professor and active elder at Trinity Presbytery Church in Burnaby & New Westminster, B.C.*

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1 "About Us," from The Contemplative Society, Victoria, BC, <https://www.contemplative.org/> (accessed July 24, 2023.)

2 "Lectio Divina" from The Contemplative Society, Victoria, BC, <https://www.contemplative.org/> (accessed July 24, 2023.)