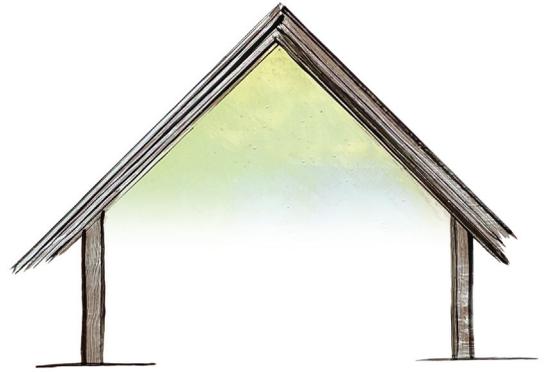


Advent Week 1



WAITING

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, we approach Advent looking again to your coming into our lives with grace and light. By the power of your Holy Spirit, open our minds so that in the reading and reflection we do in this season, we gain understanding and insight as we consider the words of Scripture and the writings and life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer so that this study brings spiritual gifts to us today. In Jesus' name, Amen.

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. How does Bonhoeffer explore the Christian idea and practice of waiting as a theme appropriate to Advent?
2. In what ways does his own life reflect an understanding of waiting as a Christian practice?

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

There are many riches in these pages that deserve reflection, but here are some of the highlights from the first week of Advent readings:

1. In the opening meditation, Bonhoeffer notes that Advent is a season of waiting, both for the coming of the child in the manger and for the last Advent, when there will be a new heaven and a new earth. However, he emphasizes that Christ is already at our door, in the form of our neighbour, in the form of a human being, "a child in ragged clothes...in every person you meet." (2)

2. He notes that “waiting is an art”—something “our impatient age has forgotten.” His lovely phrase calls waiting “hopefully doing without.” If such waiting is not known, then we never experience “the full blessing of fulfillment.” (4)
3. He observes that waiting is hard, that “not everyone can wait.” He continues, Advent is best understood and celebrated by those “who know they are poor and incomplete.” Quoting the founder of his own Lutheran denomination, he says, “[T]he emptier our hands, the better we understand what Luther meant by his dying words, ‘We’re beggars, it’s true.’” (6)
4. Christ’s coming at Christmas is not just a “pleasant and agreeable” message. It also opens us to the idea that God “lays claim to us” in judgment both of our own and the world’s evil. However, it also brings the message of grace that God forgives us: “he sanctifies us, he comes to us with his grace and love.” (8)
5. Meditating on Isaiah’s words in Isaiah 9:6, “For a child has been born for us,” Bonhoeffer interprets that the prophet spoke “full of the blessed certainty of salvation through the birth of a divine child.” Such a revelation can only come through the Spirit of God, and that voice is heard again in the angel’s words to the shepherds in Luke 2 and in believers’ jubilation that the child has been born. (10)
6. Reflecting on the meditative times of prayer in which a believer may engage, he notes that “Silence ultimately means nothing but waiting for God’s word and coming away blessed by God’s word.” This silence is full of humility that leads to “the right hearing and thus also to the right speaking of the word of God at the right time.” (12)
7. Even in our waiting, even in our ordinary times of life, “traces of God become visible” so that we “encounter God’s holy present.” This centers Bonhoeffer again in his *own* time, as fraught as that was, as the time of his own Christian life and service. “Serve your times, God’s gift in your life. God has sanctified your time.” (14)

EXPLORING THE THEMES

In some ways, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s whole life was a study in waiting. Certainly, when he wrote many of the pieces collected in this Advent devotional, his time was full of waiting as a prisoner under the Nazi regime. Arrested for his participation in the German resistance movement against Hitler, he spent the final two years of his life (1943-45) in prison, waiting. Waiting for the end of the Second World War, waiting and hoping to be freed and reunited with his family and fiancé, waiting to help Germany rebuild its society after the terrible impacts of Nazism. But his waiting was never fulfilled in those ways; instead, he was put to death by the Nazis just before the end of the war.

However, even the first years of his short but remarkable life (he was just 39 when he was killed) could be seen as waiting for a life and career that was never to be. Born into a well-to-do family, he was educated as a pastor and theologian, anticipating a life of study, teaching and pastoring in the German churches and universities of his era. His life and vocation were wrenched off that track by the rise of Nazism. As early as 1931, when he was just a 25-year-old young pastor, he was aware of and concerned about the rise of Hitler.³ The rise of Nazism impacted the rest of his life and

vocational choices, as he helped the churches in Germany confront and resist the evils that Hitler and the Nazi Party brought to that country and then to Europe and the world.

By the time of his death, Bonhoeffer had taken on many roles, as his life choices and developing theological commitments led him to address, as a Christian, the increasingly fraught and violent context of Germany from 1933 to 1945. His career encompassed these roles:

- Pastor, for short periods serving as a full-time pastor and as a youth pastor, who taught confirmation classes and led youth groups; at other times, he served as a pastoral supervisor of churches struggling against the Nazi regime;
- Professor, teaching in Berlin and as the director of a seminary for training pastors for the Confessing Church, a group of churches that rejected Nazi attempts to control the church; in the 1934 Barmen Confession, the resisting churches articulated the theological grounds for their rejection of the Nazi state “Reich Church”;
- International ecumenical leader, travelling widely, attending ecumenical conferences and speaking throughout Europe, establishing many overseas contacts within the ecumenical movement and later using some of those contacts in support of the resistance movement against Hitler;
- Leader in the political and religious struggles of that era, particularly being one of the church leaders who saw most clearly that Nazism’s persecution of Jews was a critical issue for the life of the church;⁴
- Theologian, writing essays, sermons and books that articulated his theological insights and addressed the impact of theology on the intense current and political issues that engulfed the church; during his time in the resistance movement, he was working on his final, unfinished book on Ethics;
- Conspirator in the resistance against Hitler from 1940, helping underground co-conspirators within various offices of the Nazi regime in plans to assassinate Hitler.

By the time we hear from Bonhoeffer in these Advent meditations and other writings in the devotional, he is living out the consequences of his ethical Christian decision to engage his context through active resistance to Nazism, in prison where he celebrated the final two Advent seasons of his life, in 1943 to 1944. He wrote to his good friend and theological colleague, Eberhard Bethge, in November 1943: “Life in a prison cell may well be compared to Advent: one waits, hopes, and does this, that, or the other—things that are really of no consequence—the door is shut, and can only be opened *from the outside*.” (13) In a letter to his parents that Advent, he wrote the following:

From the Christian point of view there is no special problem about Christmas in a prison cell. For many people in this building it will probably be a more sincere and genuine occasion than in places where nothing but the name is kept. The misery, suffering, poverty, loneliness, helplessness, and guilt mean something quite different in the eyes of God from what they mean in the judgment of man, that God will approach where men turn away, that Christ was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn—these are things that a prisoner can understand better than other people; for him they really are glad tidings. (71)

SCRIPTURE READING

Isaiah 40:27-31

Consider this reading from the book of Isaiah. These words of encouragement were spoken to the people of Israel at a time when, after the conquest and destruction of Judah by the Assyrian Empire, they were hoping for salvation from God that would restore their life. Reflect on the passage's confirmation of God's strength for those who wait on the Lord in light of Bonhoeffer's reflections on waiting, especially in prison during the final two years of his life.

SUGGESTED SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Journaling: If you are keeping a journal, these questions might get you started:

- What of Bonhoeffer's writings in this chapter spoke to your heart most clearly? Why?
- What insights from Bonhoeffer's words about waiting and how it impacted his own life might inspire your ideas about waiting in your own life? How might his words be supportive of your times of waiting?

Lectio Divina: Bonhoeffer's spiritual insights, hard-won through a life lived in response to God and the times in which he lived, are worth deep consideration. You might want to try a practice of *Lectio Divina* to extend your own consideration of his words. The Introduction to this study guide includes a brief description of the practice. If developing this practice interests you, you might start by taking as a text for each daily practice either the biblical text suggested by the Advent devotional, the biblical text suggested in this study guide, or any portion of Bonhoeffer's words from the daily reading.

Music as Spirituality: For this week's theme of waiting, read or sing Hymn 121, "Long ago, prophets knew."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If you engaged in any of the spiritual practices this week, share your thoughts about that with another person during the week or with your gathered study group. Consider how others found spiritual riches through the practice they chose. What do their practices add to your own spiritual engagement?
2. This study guide takes the approach of understanding Bonhoeffer's words in the Advent readings in light of the theology he was developing and the context in which he lived. However, there are other ways to consider the Advent readings from *God is in the Manger*. What did you find most helpful in the readings for Week 1? Why were those elements of the Advent readings helpful for you?
3. What do you make of Bonhoeffer's decision to resist the Nazi regime, a decision that upended the expectations he could have otherwise had for a life of pastoral and academic positions? What in the theological excerpts you have read from him in these first week readings helps you to account for his decision to resist Hitler?

