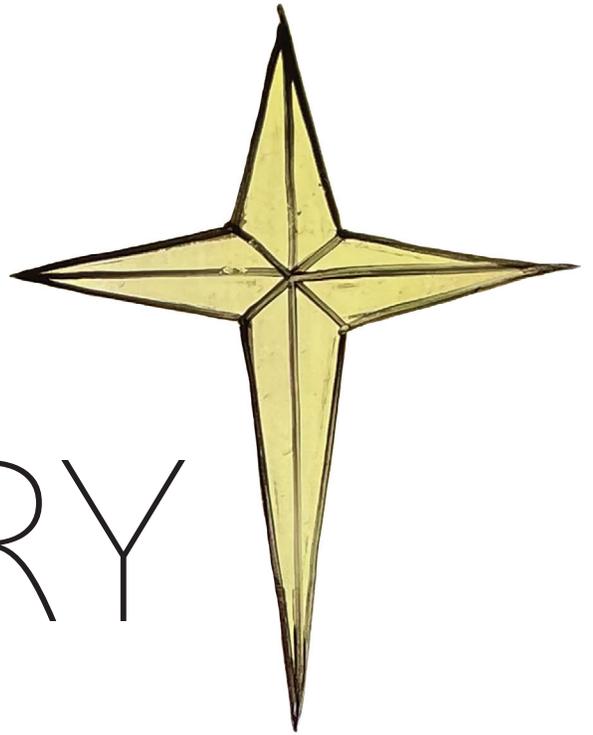


Advent Week 2



MYSTERY

OPENING PRAYER

God of the universe who comes to us as a humble child, we pray your Spirit's inspiration in this time of study so that your word in our hearts may help us learn and then live the good news you bring in Jesus. May we be receptive to your work in the world, seeing your grace even when it occurs in unexpected ways. In Jesus' name, Amen.

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. How does Bonhoeffer use the idea of “mystery” to introduce his understanding of the meaning of Jesus' coming into the world as a human being?
2. How does he explore ideas about the incarnation as a “great reversal of expectations,” and in what ways does that resonate with his own life?

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

In this week's meditations, Bonhoeffer begins to explore the key mystery of Advent and Christmas: the incarnation.

1. He states that we need to be aware of and respect the mystery of life. We try to avoid or control the mystery “because we want to be lord over everything,” but thereby we remain “on the surface, taking the world seriously only to the extent that it can be *calculated* and *exploited*.” Mystery is where “we reach the boundary of our being”—not knowing the mystery of our own life, of others, of the world. (18)

2. Reflecting on personal experiences, Bonhoeffer writes that “mystery does not mean simply not knowing something.” The “greatest mystery” is the person nearest to us and “the final depth of all mystery is when two people...love each other...yet the more they love...the more deeply they know the mystery of their love.” “The very fact that the other person is so near to me is the greatest mystery.” (20)
3. Touching a theme we will see throughout these Advent meditations, he observes that God goes in the world in God’s own way, “beyond all comprehension.” Where we are indignant, reasonable, and pious, God “aggravates our nature, our piety.” Only the humble believe “that God is so free and marvelous that he does wonders where people despair, that he takes what is little and lowly and makes it marvelous.” “God is near to lowliness; he loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken.” (22)
4. “The lowly God-man is the scandal of pious people.” In this dramatic phrase, Bonhoeffer remarks on Jesus’ claim to be not only a man but also the Son of God. This claim was not proven by signs and miracles; rather Jesus “held back”—that’s the scandal. If Christ “had documented himself with miracles, we would naturally believe, but then Christ would not be our salvation” because faith would [be] “only the recognition of an alleged supernatural fact. But that is not faith.... Only when I forgo visible proof, do I believe in God.” (24)
5. Continuing the theme of the incarnation as an affront to this world, Bonhoeffer notes that the powerful of this world fail in their courage before the manger—“[f]or this is where thrones shake, the mighty fall, the prominent perish.... the rich come to nothing because God is with the poor and hungry, but the rich [and] the satisfied are sent away empty.” The meditation includes a quote from Bonhoeffer’s *I Want to Live These Days with You* that observes that celebrating Christmas correctly means laying down “all power, all honor, all reputation, all vanity, all arrogance,” remaining lowly and seeing the glory of God “precisely in his lowliness.” (26)
6. Bonhoeffer, the theologian, writes that the origin of all Christian theology is in “the wonder of wonders: that God became human.” He continues that the task of theology “is to preserve the miracle as miracle, to comprehend, defend, and glorify God’s mystery precisely as mystery.” Christmas time “ignites within us...the wonder of the manger of the Son of God.” (28)
7. Writing at a time when there was great evil at work in the world, he writes “God himself takes on the humiliating path of reconciliation and thereby sets the world free.” God in Christ...“takes upon himself the punishment and the suffering” so that “love stands in for hate, the Holy One for the sinner. Now there is no more reality and no more world that is not reconciled with God and in peace. God loves the world—not ideal human beings but people as they are, not an ideal world but the real world.” (30)

EXPLORING THE THEMES

As Bonhoeffer explores the key message of Advent in these meditations—that the child born in a manger “was himself the Lord of glory,” he uses the idea of “mystery.” That Jesus as a humble child is indeed the Lord of glory is “the unrecognized mystery of this world”...because God became poor, low, lowly and weak out of love for humankind. (23) Before all else, it is important to recognize that we cannot understand fully what God has done in Christ. At this point, “we reach the boundary of

our being, because we want to be lord over everything and have it at our disposal, and that's just what we cannot do with the mystery." (18) Even more than the mystery of human love, (20) we should "preserve [this] miracle as *miracle*, to comprehend, defend and glorify God's mystery precisely as mystery," so we might be "captured and compelled by the wonder of the manger of the Son of God." (28)

Bonhoeffer, ever the theologian and pastor, goes on to describe a significant aspect of the mystery of God becoming human as a child in the manger, both in this chapter and throughout these meditations. This aspect flows from the reality of Jesus' human form in the weakness of the child and in the humility of his ministry, message and death on the cross. All this proclaims that "God is near to lowliness; he loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken." (22) This reality of the mighty God who becomes weak and thereby saves all who are weak and lowly, affronts human expectations, confounds our reason, and aggravates our piety. (22) Yet that is for Bonhoeffer the "incomprehensible reversal of all righteousness and pious thinking," that "God himself takes the humiliating path of reconciliation and thereby sets the world free." (30)

In reflecting on the incarnation, Bonhoeffer uses scriptural sources that associate God's salvation for broken and vulnerable humankind with a "great reversal" of the world's expectations. We see this most clearly when he quotes from Mary's song from Luke 1 in the fifth meditation this week (26):

My soul magnifies the Lord, ...
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

Excerpts from Luke 1:46-55

This theme of the divinely inaugurated reversal of our expectations occurs throughout these Advent meditations and helps us see the full import of the incarnation as Bonhoeffer explores it. Consider these quotes found in the other weeks of Advent:

- Week 1: "God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives." (5)
- Week 3: "When God chooses Mary...[it is] the beginning of a complete reversal, a new ordering of all things on this earth. ...[Christ] pushes back the high and mighty; he overturns the thrones of the powerful; ...he lifts what is lowly, and makes great and glorious in his mercy." (42)
- Week 4: "God had seen the misery of the world and had come himself in order to help. Now he was there, not as a mighty one, but in the obscurity of humanity, where there is sinfulness, weakness, wretchedness, and misery in the world. That is where God goes, and there he lets himself be found by everyone." (54)

It is important to remember that Bonhoeffer wrote these words as he himself had become another victim of the mighty and arrogant powers of his own day. However, his wider concern was not himself, but the absolute victimization of Jews and others within Germany and beyond by the Nazi regime. One gets the sense that he had forged an understanding of Christ's incarnation that was able to address the horror of the atrocities of Nazism and yet to bring some kind of hope to a bleak and despairing time. "Who among us will celebrate Christmas correctly? Whoever finally lays down all power, all honor, all reputation, all vanity, all arrogance, all individualism beside the manger; whoever remains lowly and lets God alone be high; whoever looks at the child in the manger and sees the glory of God precisely in his lowliness." (26)

SCRIPTURE READING

1 Samuel 2:1-10

This passage is set into the story of early Israel, when the tribes were establishing their hold on the land God had promised. This particular story tells of the birth of Samuel, the prophet who guided the transition to the monarchy under Saul and then David. When Hannah, a barren woman, receives God's word that she will bear the child Samuel, she is portrayed singing a song of praise. This psalm is the inspiration from which Mary's song is later modeled. Consider how it similarly illustrates the persistent and unexpected theme of the Lord's upending of the power of the rich and care for the vulnerable and lowly.

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?
- In what ways do Bonhoeffer's writings about the incarnation and its unexpected news for the world inspire your life?

Lectio Divina: If this spiritual practice interests you, focus on either Hannah's song of praise from 1 Samuel or Mary's song of praise in Luke 1 as a text for your practice. Alternatively, you could use any of the biblical texts suggested by the Advent devotional or any portion of Bonhoeffer's words from the daily readings.

Music as Spirituality: For this week's theme of mystery, read or sing Hymn 123 in The Presbyterian Book of Praise, "My soul gives glory to my God," which is a setting of Mary's song from Luke 1.

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?

