
Fit for the Feast: Bonhoeffer and Baptism

An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Canon David Boyd
The Feast of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

"Who am I? They often tell me I would step from my prison cell
poised, cheerful and sturdy,
like a nobleman from his country estate.
Who am I? They often tell me I would speak with my guards
freely, pleasantly and firmly,
as if I had it to command.
Who am I? I have also been told that I suffer the days of misfortune
with serenity, smiles and pride,
as someone accustomed to victory.

Am I really what others say about me?
Or am I only what I know of myself?
Restless, yearning and sick, like a bird in its cage,
struggling for the breath of life,
as though someone were choking my throat;
hungering for colors, for flowers, for the songs of birds,
thirsting for kind words and human closeness,
shaking with anger at capricious tyranny and the pettiest slurs,
bedeviled by anxiety, awaiting great events that might never occur,
fearfully powerless and worried for friends far away,
weary and empty in prayer, in thinking, in doing,
weak, and ready to take leave of it all.

Who am I? This man or that other?
Am I then this man today and tomorrow another?
Am I both all at once? An imposter to others,
but to me little more than a whining, despicable weakling?
Does what is in me compare to a vanquished army,
that flees in disorder before a battle already won?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, you know me, O God. You know I am yours."[^{\[1\]}](#)

These are the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: professor, pastor, anti-Nazi activist, and martyr. He wrote this poem in June of 1944, from the confines of prison, awaiting his fate. He would meet that fate on April 9, 1945, 4 weeks before the collapse of the Third Reich, hanged by the ideology he spent his adult life preaching against.

Twelve years earlier, just two days after Adolf Hitler took office as the democratically elected chancellor of Germany, a 26-year-old Bonhoeffer took to the airwaves to expose the German people's idolatrous desire for a Fuhrer and to warn them of the seductive influence of a nationalism founded on fear and hatred. Suddenly, radios fell silent; Bonhoeffer had become the first victim of the Nazi's suppression of free speech, the broadcast abruptly ended by the authorities in Berlin.

From his very earliest days as a student, Bonhoeffer wrestled with the nature of belief and its consequences in his lectures, sermons, letters, and books. Looking around his changing country, he wondered how professed Christians could proclaim Christ with their lips and crucify him with their lives. He watched as the Nazi party perverted the Church with what they called “Positive Christianity,” a watered-down Gospel that ignored the powerful poverty of the Cross for an Aryan Jesus that preferred the powerful against the poor. Bonhoeffer was deeply offended by what he called cheap grace: “the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession... grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”^[ii] Instead, he preached costly grace. One of Bonhoeffer’s most famous quotes summarizes his position well: “When Jesus calls us, he bids us come and die.”^[iii]

For Bonhoeffer, the death he suffered at the hands of the Nazis began decades before at his baptism, that decisive moment that forever joined Bonhoeffer to the life *and* death of his savior Jesus Christ. Following Paul’s teaching in Romans 6, Bonhoeffer taught that baptism contains in it both a resounding “yes” and a necessary “no.” In the waters, we say yes to Christ, yes to reconciliation, yes to new life in the Kingdom of God. And we say no. We say no to our allegiances that put us at odds with Jesus. We say no to idols that promise prosperity and safety in exchange for our souls. We say no to the myth of redemptive violence, to the seduction of power without sacrifice, to the comforting lies that allow us to ignore the suffering of our neighbors. In baptism, we renounce the false stories the world tells us about success, strength, and self-sufficiency and we are plunged into the true story of Jesus’ death and resurrection. It is a story that costs us our old selves, but gives us something infinitely more: the unshakable identity of one who belongs to Christ.

As Jesus reminds us in his parable of the fish in the net, not every fish is fit for the feast. There is urgency to the decision of faith; in each moment, we have the opportunity to stand with Christ and the vulnerable or against them. This urgency sparks Bonhoeffer’s question, “Who am I?” Am I fit for the feast? Am I the courageous disciple the world sees, or the anxious soul I experience myself to be? Am I steady in my faith, or only holding on by a thread? And if we’re honest, haven’t we asked the same question: Will my yes to Jesus hold when it actually costs me something?

Bonhoeffer’s gift to us is that he didn’t run from those questions of belief. He let them echo in the silence of his cell, and he wrote them down not to resolve them, but to bring them before God in prayer. And in doing so, he discovered something truer than all his fears:

“Whoever I am, you know me, O God. You know I am yours.”

That is what makes us fit for the feast.

Not our perfection, but our presence with the vulnerable and oppressed.

Not our strength, but God’s strong claim on us.

Not even our belief, but our baptism, our being forever joined to the body of Christ.

Because in those waters, we were not just cleansed, we were claimed. Buried with Christ. Raised with Christ.

And no fear, no failure, no ideology, no empire can ever take that away.

Perhaps you’re wondering today, like Bonhoeffer wondered, is my faith deep enough, my courage strong enough, my life good enough? Then hear this:

The promise of baptism is not that we’ll always feel ready to answer the call, or always feel brave when the crisis comes. The promise of baptism is that we have been joined to Jesus Christ fully, finally, and forever. And that means we do not belong to fear. We do not belong to death. We belong to Christ. It is Christ who we return to, again and again, whenever the cost of discipleship feels too high, whenever the road is unclear, whenever we wonder who we really are.

“Whoever I am, you know me, O God. You know I am yours.”

Amen.

^[i] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 514.

^[ii] Ibid., 308.

[iii] Ibid., 313.