

From Preparation to Participation
Christmas Eve, 2010
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20, Titus 2:11-14

Christmas Eve 1943 found Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a German prison.

There the Lutheran pastor and theologian was awaiting trial for his role in a failed attempt to assassinate Adolph Hitler. Prisons have long been places where God's servants have found a particular clarity about faith and the life of discipleship. That's as true for Bonhoeffer as it was for the apostle Paul and Martin Luther King.

In a letter smuggled out by a sympathetic prison guard, Bonhoeffer wrote these words:

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 (of Christmas) is kept. That misery, suffering, poverty, loneliness, helplessness and guilt mean something quite different in the eyes of God from what they mean in the judgment of humans ... that God will approach where men and women 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 a prisoner, they really are glad tidings.

Gathered here tonight, surrounded by the warmth of family and the comforts of the season, we are a long way away from a prison cell in Nazi Germany in 1943. But Bonhoeffer speaks a Christmas truth that cuts across all the differences that separate his life from ours. We come tonight to celebrate the birth that transformed the world.

But, as Bonhoeffer wrote ... to a prisoner, that promise of redemption and its fulfillment in Christ do indeed provide unmitigated and profound glad tidings, good news that in and of itself should make our hearts soar.

And we shouldn't be too quick to separate ourselves or otherwise dismiss that perspective. The Bible tells us that God's people have been familiar with the inside of a prison cell since the time of the patriarchs. Joseph ... Moses ... Sampson ... Daniel ... John the Baptist ... Jesus ... the apostles ... Paul and Silas.

God found ways to use these prisoners. In our day, a prison is too often an easier thing for us to build ... and run well ... and fill than a school... or so it would seem.

A recent Pew Report reminds us that:

- For the first time in our nation's history one in 100 men and women in the U.S. are in prison or jail.
- One in 31 men and women are in prison, on parole or probation.
- One in 30 men between the ages of 20 and 34 is behind bars. For black males in that age group, one in nine is incarcerated.
- And the female prison population is expanding at brisk pace. For black women in their mid- to late-30s, the incarceration rate also has hit the one-in-100 mark.
- The vast majority of these folks are non-violent and poor.

For the last year or so, I've had the privilege of getting to know a man who spent many Christmases in prison. He's out now, having paid his price. To him, simple things on this side of those bars mean more than most of us can fathom – the taste of ice cream ... the sound of a dog barking ... a good day's work ... the uninterrupted company of others.

And what about the rest of us? In what ways have we become captive?

How might we be prisoners, you and I? Perhaps we are prisoners of others' expectations or others' judgment. Perhaps we are captive of our own shame and self image. Perhaps we are prisoners to fear and anxiety or addiction.

Or we feel shackled by circumstances – whether it is a dead-end job or relationship. Maybe we feel we are prisoners to a life that could have been so different had we had more education or the right opportunity.

Maybe it's not all the time – but some times and, in those times, it's real.

Or maybe, if we don't feel imprisoned ourselves, we know of others – family, loved ones, friends who've become prisoners in life even if they are nowhere near iron bars and concrete walls.

This advent, we at Caldwell have been thinking about the words we say each Sunday in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom Come."

What does it mean, we've been asking, when that becomes our advent prayer, a prayer of hopeful anticipation and preparation? What kind of kingdom do we mean? What kind of king?

Tonight that prayer is answered anew. A tiny, vulnerable child is born and laid in a manger and God's kingdom on earth is born all over again, a little more complete ... a little closer ... a little more real to us all ... if we know what to look for.

One sign of that kingdom is liberation from whatever unjustly imprisons God's people. Psalm 146, among others, celebrates a God who sets the prisoners free. In our own time, in preparation for the coming of the messiah, we sing a familiar hymn that includes these words:

“O come, O come, Emmanuel. And ransom captive Israel.”

That was the promise to Israel, that God’s people would be ransomed ... liberated ... set free by a just and loving God. It is the same promise to us, whatever holds us captive. Wonderful counselor ... mighty God ... Everlasting Father ... Prince of Peace ... who came in a manger and was worshipped by both shepherds and kings, the one to whom all authority in heaven and earth has been given.

* * *

Earlier we heard few verses from the Apostle Paul’s letter to his friend Titus.

Titus doesn’t get a lot of airplay in the church. Compared to other books of the Bible, it is tiny, a three-chapter letter than takes up less than two pages. But in it Paul describes the hope of what it means to be liberated by the Christ.

I asked Carol to read from Eugene Peterson’s modern translation of that letter because it describes that liberation in such accessible language and with such a Christmas Eve spirit. It reads:

“God’s readiness to give and forgive is now public. Salvation is available for everyone!”
(v.11)

Then, listen to the liberation and rehabilitation that Paul speaks of as he describes life in and for Christ:

We’re being shown how to turn our backs on a godless, indulgent life, and how to take on a God-filled, God-honoring life. This new life is starting right now, and is whetting our appetites for the glorious day when our great God and Savior Jesus Christ Appears. He offered himself as a sacrifice to free us from a dark,

rebellious life into this good, pure life, making us a people he can be proud of, energetic in goodness.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew that kind of God-honoring life.

In 1943, he may have been behind physical bars ... but through his remarkable faith he was liberated from the ways of the world ... freed from the “godless, indulgent” and “dark rebellious life” that Paul describes.

He had done what his faith compelled to do and was at peace. So words of the birth of Christ were for him the greatest kind of glad tidings.

For us, tonight ends our advent journey. Across time and space we gather with the shepherds and the magi to celebrate the birth of the Christ. Some have been preparing for this night for four weeks, practicing the discipline of joyous expectation. Others here may not have been that intentional. But the tidings are every bit as glad for them tonight. However we have prepared for this evening, we are called tonight to make the turn from preparation to participation in God’s will, expressed most purely in the life of Christ Jesus.

So, friends, hear the good news of the Christ, God with us, as liberation from whatever holds you captive from the joy of your salvation. Tonight we hear the glad tidings of Jesus’ birth as the truest and best good news of all. With that news, each of us is ransomed from captivity. We are offered freedom and called to participate ...not in the world’s purposes for God ...but in God’s purposes for the world.

Merry Christmas. Amen.