

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Over the course of his brief life Dietrich Bonhoeffer produced an extensive body of writings that included theological classics, personal letters, historical documents, Bible studies and meditations, ecumenical and academic lectures, essays—and seventy-one sermons.

The scope and variety of Bonhoeffer's writings reflect the unusual nature of his biographical and professional path. He considered a career either in academia or the ministry and pursued the qualifications for both. In the early 1930s he became deeply engaged in the international ecumenical movement and its cause, particularly the issues of international peace and the question of Christian pacifism. When Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933 Bonhoeffer was about to turn twenty-seven, and suddenly his personal decisions about career choices became secondary to the crucial issues that confronted Germany's churches and its leaders.

From prison Bonhoeffer would write about the “fragmentary” nature of his life and the turbulent circumstances under which he and his generation had lived and worked.¹ Throughout the different phases of his life and under extremely diverse circumstances,

however, the writing and preaching of sermons proved to be a constant thread, revealing the development of his faith and his theology.

His earliest sermons were written as a theological student, and several of them were written for children and youth services. The next sermons were from his time as an assistant pastor in an overseas German congregation in Barcelona, whose members were mostly well-educated, wealthy businesspeople, diplomats, and expatriates. He went on from there to work as a student chaplain at the Technical College in Berlin, tasked with creating a student ministry where none had existed before, and he tried to preach in a way that would interest the largely secular and disinterested student body. During his year of study from 1930 to 1931 at Union Theological Seminary in New York he visited a number of churches and commented critically on many of the sermons he heard, with the exception of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, noting that there “I heard the Gospel preached.”² Upon his return to Germany, he preached occasionally at several churches in Berlin before spending eighteen months serving two German congregations in London. When he returned to Germany in the spring of 1935 to train seminarians for the Confessing Church, he sought to prepare them for a different and uncertain kind of ministry amid the realities of Nazi Germany. Preaching was a central part of that preparation. In the remaining period of his life, during the war, in the German resistance, and finally in prison, he wrote biblical reflections, meditations, and several sermons that were shared with his students, colleagues, and family.

It was an unusual path for a Christian pastor, and this is an unusual collection of sermons that give insight not only into his theological and personal development but into his reflections on the events unfolding around him. Bonhoeffer followed the lectionary and believed that the preacher's task was not to offer the congregation a litany of his or her own concerns and views or a

summary of the latest news, but to preach the word of God. Yet he also believed that Scripture, preached correctly, revealed the word of God to the listener, and that the church's task was to speak God's word to the world. Bonhoeffer emphasized that the preacher could and should help the congregation understand how God's word was evident in the world around them, and help them navigate the challenges they faced.

Preaching, however, is never simply the means by which a pastor speaks to contemporary issues or parish concerns. It is an organic aspect of the relationship that develops between pastors and those to whom they minister. Through sermons pastors offer deeply personal insights into who they are, and the act of preaching is a significant part of the ongoing and ever-deepening relationship between pastor and congregation. The sermon, in fact, may be the best means for congregations to get to know their pastors and to grow with them along their shared journey of faith.

All these elements are evident in the sermons that have been collected for this volume. The first two sermons were composed as requirements during Bonhoeffer's theological studies. As is often the case with beginning preachers, Bonhoeffer's frame of reference was largely personal, and he sometimes attempted to do too much. The next four sermons were written in Barcelona. It was his first experience with the regular routines of ministry and preaching, and he began to think very deliberately about the content of his sermons and the act of preaching. This volume includes both his first and last sermons preached in Barcelona, and the difference between them is striking. An August 1928 letter to his student friend Helmut Rössler gives a glimpse of how his thinking about preaching was evolving.

I am preaching much differently than I would have thought possible of myself. . . . I have long thought that sermons had a

center that, if you hit it, would move anyone or confront them with a decision. I no longer believe that. First of all, a sermon can never grasp the center, but can only itself *be grasped* by it, by Christ. And then Christ becomes flesh as much in the word of the pietists as in that of the clerics or of the religious socialists, and these empirical connections actually pose difficulties for preaching that are absolute, not relative.³

He had come to realize that the parishioners sitting in the pews in front of him were “individuals, totally different people, people ‘united’ only by the word in the *church*.”⁴ The Barcelona sermons also reveal Bonhoeffer’s development as a Christian during this period. In particular, his 1927 sermon on Luke 9:51–56 has a fervent, almost evangelistic undertone, suggesting that the transition “from theologian to Christian”—often assumed to have started after his year of study in New York—was in fact already underway.⁵

Beginning with his 1931 sermon on Luke 12:35–40, his preaching reflects the gathering political storms. While a number of his most striking sermons from this period (many of which he preached during his time in London) were published in the first volume of collected sermons,⁶ the present volume offers many examples of how he reacted to the growing crisis in Germany. In some of these sermons the references are explicit; in others, right below the surface. Throughout this volume I have attempted to provide the historical context.

Unfortunately, there are no recordings of Bonhoeffer giving a sermon. (There are no known recordings of him speaking at all.) With the exception of an account by his student Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, most descriptions of his preaching suggest that he was forceful and charismatic. Zimmermann observed that as an academic lecturer Bonhoeffer was “very concentrated, quite unsentimental, almost dispassionate, clear as crystal, with a certain rational coldness”

and continued that he wasn't a very dynamic preacher: "he never had full churches, as far as I can judge."⁷

Other students who studied under Bonhoeffer during his time in Berlin, however, recalled his speaking style as "extraordinary." He had "an infectious personality" and would become completely involved in what he was speaking about. His students "listened to his sentences with such intensity that one could hear the flies buzzing."⁸ In his evaluation of Bonhoeffer's October 1927 sermon on Luke 9:51, church superintendent Max Diestel commented that Bonhoeffer's preaching showed "great assurance and vitality."

Bonhoeffer's sermons reveal him as a deeply attentive pastor, a mentor to his students, and a prophetic voice in his church. They also give us a glimpse of Bonhoeffer as a person—particularly in terms of what preaching meant to him and how it sustained him, spiritually and personally. In 1941 he received news of a relative's terminal illness, and wrote his close friend Eberhard Bethge: "What would I do if I knew that in four to six weeks it would all be over? That is running through my head. I believe that I would try to teach theology again as before and to preach often."⁹

He preached his last sermon on the morning of April 8, 1945, in a southern German schoolhouse where he and a group of other prisoners had spent the night under guard. They were being transported from Buchenwald to camps in the south; Bonhoeffer was supposed to be transported to the Flossenbürg camp but had ended up in another van. According to accounts by those who were with him, the readings were Isaiah 53:5 ("With his wounds we are healed") and 1 Peter 1:3: ("Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead"). Bonhoeffer spoke about the experience of imprisonment and what it had meant for all of them. Suddenly he was summoned by German officers, who had

been ordered to take him to the concentration camp in Flossenbürg. He quickly gathered his things and in passing gave a message to British prisoner Payne Best to convey to Bishop George Bell in England: “Tell him that this is the end—for me the beginning of life.” He was taken to the concentration camp in Flossenbürg, and early the next morning he was hanged.¹⁰

The accounts about his final sermon, in April 1945, remind us that for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the act of scriptural exegesis, writing a sermon, and preaching it to his fellow Christians was a discipline that grounded him, perhaps even at the very end of his life. While we do not have his final sermon, the last text I’ve selected to include in this book might be considered one of his last sermons. It was a letter written from prison in May 1944 on the occasion of the baptism of his namesake, Dietrich Bethge, and I have chosen to pair it in this volume with a baptismal sermon for Bonhoeffer’s nephew in 1932. Although written in very different periods of his life and under different historical circumstances, the two texts have poignant similarities. In these texts, Bonhoeffer looked back retrospectively at the family, cultural, and religious traditions that had shaped him, expressing his hope that these traditions would also shape the lives of these children. Yet, both of these texts also look forward, for baptism is a sacrament that above all expresses human trust and confidence in God’s love. Written in prison, Bonhoeffer’s 1944 letter reflected his hopes not only for his namesake but for his church and his country.

A Sermon for His Contemporaries

July 1926, Berlin



This sermon and an introductory exegesis of the scriptural text were written for Friedrich Mahling’s homiletics seminar when Bonhoeffer was twenty years old and in his seventh semester of theological studies at the University of Berlin. The sermon was never preached, but in his introduction to the sermon Bonhoeffer writes: “The sermon is intended to be preached at a worship service for young people 16–20 years old who are educated or are somehow spiritually advanced (members of the youth movement, etc.).”

It is an interesting comment, reminding us that Bonhoeffer’s imagined listeners were people like him—understandably, for a beginning preacher. Many passages can be read autobiographically. He writes of the turbulent and uncertain times in which he and his

contemporaries are living. In light of what was to come, there are several haunting passages, such as his comment on his generation's susceptibility to the temptations of authoritarianism—an insight that he would explore more deeply in his 1933 essay "The Führer and the Individual in the Younger Generation."¹

The primary question for his generation, he writes, is the search for authority and autonomy—which Bonhoeffer states can only be found in God and God's word. God has come to humanity in Christ; rather than follow their own path, people need to respond to this, to the word of God that is already with them. Obedience to God, he writes, is the truest expression of human freedom: "When we do not recognize all earthly authorities as being dependent on that one authority, we make them our idols, be they state, church, reason, or genius." His conclusion is striking, summoning his listeners to confront the challenges of their times, in obedience to God: "Accept God's word, hear it and do it! . . . Come out, humanity, from the foxhole." In his evaluation Mahling praised the sermon's "dashing manliness and heartfelt goodness, pure truthfulness and conscientious seriousness" and judged it to be a "very good interpretation and application of the text."²

James 1:21–25: Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law,

*the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget
but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.*

We do not live in a classical era of world history, but it is much less a time that someone [in a] later century will be able simply to ignore as ordinary. A time in which death has been so close at hand and so frightful and which has known war, distress, hunger, and scarcity has too many horrors to have a classical mien, not to mention a complacent countenance. Distress has all too distinctly etched furrows on her countenance. And where do you most unmistakably see the face that a particular era displays? You see it in the young people! Youths who have seen death, hunger, and a lost war look different from youths who have spent those years in a bucolic landscape or *playing* war. Why shouldn't we just say it? We all know it. May God preserve us that we take pride in it. Truly, we would be more childish than any young people have ever been.

Yes, the young people of today display different characteristics. But are these solely the marks of distress? God help us, no! But they still are the marks of unrelenting severity; not the severity of resignation but a severity that searches and knows that it must continue to search lest everything else be lost. I know that none of us wants to be dependent on our parents; we want to be able to support ourselves. We don't want to breathe only the air of our parents' home. We want to find a place where the wind blows more freely. We want, we seek, we hope, we desire, we fight—always we, we! Always full of longing to do great things! In the midst of this activity and urgency the question about God raises itself with terrible seriousness. It is the question about the reality of the divine. In the midst of this so-called antiauthoritarian era we ask again about an authority, about

who is worthy of being called an authority. In the midst of an era of amorality and immodesty we hear words of judgment and forgiveness shouted aloud. We ask, we try, we philosophize, we attempt to find a way to sneak into another world, we don't sleep, we are completely awake and, in truth, not sober. Among the cacophony of voices we hear one voice that we want to listen to today. This voice does not cry in the marketplace; it is not sensational, but it is awake and it is sober. "Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness . . . and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls."

"One path among many" is what we might want to say. "And in addition, it is a highly old-fashioned one and not terribly clear." Yes, it is one path and still the only one. It is not one of the human paths that truly are no paths at all. It is the path of God to humanity. Listen carefully! The word that must be grasped is clearly *God's* word. It is true. But how can we human beings understand God's exalted word? If it is *God's* word, then it is too exalted and powerful for humans! Yes, certainly, it is God's word. Long ago God had already planted it in us. Perhaps we just haven't noticed it yet. God has planted his word in the midst of our sordid existence. It lives there in silence, and for many it is completely hidden. God is already with us; indeed, God is truly already *in* us. Believe it! Accept it! God has taken up residence in our evil hearts. It is there that God has deposited God's word, the word that can save your souls. God made this promise at your baptism, and God is faithful. Perhaps we have felt this already when being accused or at the assurance of pardon and have therefore not paid attention to it. We have arrogantly and conceitedly driven it from us. We have uttered impressive words, mumbled something about philosophy and Nietzsche and about being bigger than our sins, and have carried our wise heads exceedingly high. Oh! You know that if it weren't so sad it would be funny. I can't help but

think that our heavenly Father also knows how to laugh at human arrogance. Oh, how terrible if God didn't!

Accept with humility the word that has been implanted in you. Simply believe that God's word is already there. It directs you and forgives you. Be humble by making yourselves subservient to it. Take it seriously when your conscience calls out to you, "You have sinned." Believe that it is true that God wants to live with you and always has wanted this. Take it seriously, because it is God's word. Here we are talking about God's faithfulness, and in this case one either says yes or no—"I believe" or "I don't believe." Here one accepts it with humility, trusting in God's word and way, or one rejects it with arrogance, trusting in one's own way. Saying a simple yes and listening obediently is to believe, hear, and accept the word as James intended.

But what does it mean that God speaks and that *we hear*? If God, who is absolute holiness and absolute duty, speaks, then God's word always commands the fulfilling of this absolute duty. This is the command of holiness, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." And it is with this command that God confronts our conscience. God agitates us violently. God makes us tremble in the presence of divine holiness. What should happen then when we speak about hearing this word? Yes, certainly, we hear it, we believe it completely, we know with whom we are dealing, and yet is this enough? Even the demons believe and tremble. If God requires something of me, should I really only say, "I have heard it," and have that be the end of it? No, that will not do at all if I know that *God* has said it. In this case there is only one answer. Obedience! *Bow down* beneath God's almighty hand. Belief that hears but does not obey can certainly not be called belief!

Yes, actual obedience—we can't let anyone diminish this. Obedience is a word that we don't like to hear very much today and whose meaning we don't want to understand. It is a word that, since the

time of Nietzsche, we have contemptuously driven out from ethics and especially from religion. Ethics is an individual's free self-determination. How can obedience possibly have anything to do with this? Religion is somehow an emotional fusion with the divine or maybe the theoretical recognition of the divine. But what is the meaning of obedience, if I myself become God? This is what many in our circle think. Slaves obey. People who think for themselves are free. But I want to tell you something different. Religion is submission to a clearly acknowledged authority. It is absolute submission. Ethics is the attempt to obey this authority. Our actions in this world demonstrate how we honor this authority. Reflect on this for a minute. Wherever there is obedience, there is authority. It is simply unthinkable that serious persons would refuse to acknowledge some form of authority, even if it be simply the authority of their intellect that rejects all authorities.

Now, however, all imaginable authorities are merely faint reproductions and shadows of the one authority who really earns that name and without whom there would be no earthly authority at all. When we do not recognize all earthly authorities as being dependent on that one authority, we make them our idols, be they state, church, reason, or genius. Is it discernible for us anywhere else than where it reveals itself to us in its absolute otherworldliness? God is revealed in God's holy word. Jesus Christ is the path from God to humanity. All human road signs are subject to rigorous questioning when seen in the light of this path, regardless of the words they carry: to God, to the mysteries, to the world of the spirits, to the soul, or to a superhuman race [*Übermenschen*]. "Welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." Therefore God's authority commands obedience. God's word comes to us with this command. Now we have seen that. Should we be ashamed of this?

Does it not depend upon the one to whom we are obedient? Is there not a certain pride in being obedient to a powerful person? But it comes to the same thing whether it is comfortable or not, since we are not on this earth to have fun. Assume, just for a moment, that it is true and real that there is a God, a holy claim, and a holy path from God to humanity, and that this is Jesus Christ. Then try once again to open your mouths and speak about the superhuman and about being “greater than one’s sin,” or to preach a shallow Epicureanism. I tell you, the words will stick in your throat at the mere thought. Onward to duty and to obedience! We all know people who don’t think this way. They come to church often to “hear,” as they say, God’s word. As someone told me recently, they also allow themselves to be criticized a little by the sermon. They take pleasure in the “wonderful” paradoxes of the Gospels. They take a certain pride in having at least been honest with themselves once again and having discovered certain evil things about themselves. With the thought “Know thyself” they think they have done enough. Then they go home, having had enough for a while. They are no different from those who look at themselves in the mirror for a moment and see that a lot of things are not the way they should be. But they have barely turned away when they forget the image, and everything remains a mess. Their glance in the mirror is as fleeting as their desire to take anything seriously. These people are deceiving themselves. They convince themselves that they have already done enough. Because they believe this, we see that they have not really heard what is being said to them. How can anyone who has truly listened to God believe that it is enough merely to hear? God’s word forces us to act obediently. It is a living and powerfully creative force that one [cannot] take up as if it didn’t exist at all. It was when God’s word became flesh that “we saw his glory.” Truly, we saw and we heard. But when God’s word became flesh, it was then that God’s holy claim became flesh and we were required to obey!

Be *doers* of the word! Whoever does not is like the man who built his house on the sand and it was soon torn down by the wind. Be *doers* of the word! One really doesn't even have to say this, because it is so obvious for the person who has really heard *God* and who knows that a good tree bears good fruit. Be doers of the *word*! These are therefore not laws and moral rules that have been self-discovered, even if they appear so important to you. Be doers of the word! Be obedient to God and to no one else. But when you are bound to God in obedience, then you have become truly free. You are free from everything from which you should be free; free from people and powers, because you are bound to God. To be free from God, however, means to be godless! Think about it! If we are God's through obedience, then we have a law of freedom, a law that makes us free from everything that controls us. It is a law that we fulfill out of free obedience. But once again: How do we come to this obedience? Is it born in us? Oh no, that is certainly not the case. At first, when God calls us, we want to flee and to hide like Adam. We become afraid and frightened at the thought that we will have to deal with God. It is horrible to fall into the hands of the living God. No, this obedience certainly does not come from us. But when we hear the word of God correctly we become obedient. The word about the claim and about the gift of God, about holy love, is the word that coaxes our will. God *has* loved—should we therefore hate? God is already there—should we turn God away? The word has been planted—should we not accept it and become doers of the word?

We have been confronted by words and thoughts that are very uncomfortable for all of us: authority, obedience, and law. And can it be that here we want to speak about freedom? Yes. Freedom is always there where our will says yes to God—but indeed to God and not to an idol. Through this people become bound, because

they bind themselves to something earthly. But if they truly bind themselves to God, then they are truly free from earthly concerns, through obedience—free! If they are steadfast in their obedience, then they will be blessed in their actions. God will be with them, and they will have the certainty of their being bound to God in all that they do. But our letter does not say [anything] to suggest that everything Christians do is pure and admirable. A word of warning needs to be issued! We are not allowed to dream about being holy. Our deeds remain sinful, they remain demonstration and an illusion. Our work is daily repentance, precisely because we are obedient to God. Repentance is the first and the last thing that anyone who has become a doer of the word must do. Repent, *because* the kingdom of heaven is near! Those who have been called by God, who are constrained to obedience to God, are those who know what daily repentance means. Take my obedient deeds as my offering and nothing else. “We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!” But because the deeds are obedient deeds, God does not speak judgment but grace.

Now we know that the phrase “be doers” does not mean “Gather laurels on which you can rest before God.” It means, rather, demonstrate that your belief in God is really a belief in *God*, that this belief is submission to the authority, that it shows that you are obedient. “Work, but not for your own, but for God’s glory.” “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” God’s claim and love has preceded you. Accept God’s word, hear it and do it!

Do we really still want to ask what there is to do? Must we really still talk about putting aside uncleanness and wickedness? About the love that is selfless? Should we dictate to the tree what kind of fruit it should bear, or to the wheat kernel what kind of wheat sheaf it should grow, or to the lily what kind of bloom it should bear? Do

what comes to hand. Adam, where are you? Adam, don't hide. The Lord also sees behind the bulwarks. Come out, humanity, from the foxhole. Come out to where the breeze is blowing free, where the bullets whistle by. There, brother, you are vulnerable, exposed. This means for you: "Decide, act! Believe and obey!"