

God Is with Us

Barcelona, Quasimodogeniti
(First Sunday after Easter), April 15, 1928



Bonhoeffer preached this sermon and the next while serving as a pastoral assistant (German: *Vikar*) in a Lutheran congregation in Barcelona, Spain, as part of his training for ordination. Even though he was speaking in German to German-speaking people, Bonhoeffer found preparing and delivering his first sermons challenging. But he was eager for the experience, and his supervising pastor was happy to let him preach frequently. On this first Sunday after Easter, the twenty-two-year-old preacher began with thoughts of the ancient world, the study of which was then not far behind him: the world of legends and myths, in which most people traveled on foot and might meet divine beings on the road. It was also the world of the Bible: the Old Testament, which tells of people who had such encounters with God, and the New Testament when Jesus walked the roads of Palestine with his disciples. But as the congregation that walked with Bonhoeffer through this sermon discovered, the possibility of a walk with God exists still, even today.

Matthew 28:20: *Remember, I am with you always,
to the end of the world.*

Fairy tales and legends from the oldest times tell of the days when God walked among human beings. Those were splendid times, when one met a wanderer on the road who asked for lodging, then at home one recognized in this simple man the Lord God and was richly rewarded. Those were wonderful times, when God and human beings were still so close that people could walk and talk with God. Indeed, those were the days, recounted only by fairy tales and legends, that spoke of all the slumbering, secret human hopes as if they had already become reality. The beginning of our own Bible also relates how the Lord God walked about in the garden of paradise in the evening and lived and conversed with human beings. Probably very few peoples do not have similar stories. Blessed were those people permitted to experience those times when God and human beings were still close.

How quickly things changed. Our Bible recounts the story of the fall as the turning point in history. Human beings were driven from the garden in which they lived with God; now they lived separated from God in guilt and unhappiness that increased from generation to generation. The rift between God and human beings deepened. Humanity sank into the night. And as long as human beings can remember, they know only the night, the time when God no longer moves freely among us, and many look longingly back to the primal age of the fairy tale, to paradise, as if to a lost home they themselves never even knew. Or people of powerful hope speak and spoke about coming days, when God would once more dwell among human beings, when the kingdom of God would be established on earth. God and human beings somehow belong together, and God will return and be their guest.

There was one day in human history when this hope had to be radically demolished, a day on which people had to become aware of the eternal distance between human beings and God—the day humanity raised its hand against the God dwelling among them and nailed Jesus Christ to the cross—Good Friday. But there was also a day of divine response to human

action, a day when God took up dwelling among human beings anew and for all eternity, the day when the outstretched but unholy hand of humanity was filled, against all hope, with divine grace, the day when Jesus Christ was raised, Easter. Remember, I am with you . . . that is the Easter message, not the distant, but the nearby God, that is Easter.

A searching, an anxious groping and questioning for divine things permeates our own age. A great loneliness has come upon our age, the kind of loneliness found only in a godforsaken age. The enormous distress of isolation and homelessness has come upon the colossal, wild activity of countless masses of people in the midst of our big cities. Yet the yearning grows for the time when once again God might abide among human beings, when God might be found. A thirst for contact with divine things has come upon people, a burning thirst demanding to be quenched. Currently a great many remedies are being offered for sale that promise to quench this thirst in a radical fashion and for which hundreds of thousands of hands greedily reach out—in the midst of this wild activity and marketing frenzy with new means and ways, we find the One Word of Jesus Christ: Remember, I am here. . . . You don't need to search very far at all, nor to question or engage in all sorts of mysterious activity. I *am* here; that is, Jesus does not promise his coming, does not prescribe paths that might take a person to him, but simply says: I am here; whether we see Jesus or not, feel him or not, want him or not—none of this makes any difference over against the fact that Jesus is here with us, that he is simply wherever we are, and that we can do absolutely nothing. I am with you always . . .

But if all this is indeed true, if Jesus really is with us, then God is also with us wherever we are, and we are no longer abandoned, homeless, lonely, then—let us follow this line of thinking to its conclusion—then the age of the legends has become reality again, and God is living among us. The only important thing now is to keep our eyes open to see where we find God—as was true for those people in the legend who had to recognize the Lord God in the foreign wanderer. God wants to be among us—do we want to make a liar of God by not believing? God is still with human beings despite Good Friday—Remember, I am with you always. . . .

But before we all start rejoicing too quickly, one serious reflection. What does it really mean to say that Jesus or God is with us? that God is in the world? Where and how are we aware of that? God lives, lives for

the world, the world is filled with God, is transfigured, is meaningful, *sub specie aeternitatis* [from the viewpoint of the Eternal]—that was the Easter message. But now we ask further: Where can I sense something of this divine fullness in the world and in my own life? And we answer that today, too, God is still walking among us; today, too, we can speak with God; we are together with God, walk down the street with God, encounter God in the foreigner on the road, the beggar at the door. The world is God's world; wherever we go, we encounter God, and Jesus, the Resurrected, is with us. Remember, I am with you. . . .

But isn't all this merely metaphorical language? What can we possibly mean by saying that Jesus is with us? Isn't that merely an approximate, undefined feeling?

Not at all. It is completely clear. Jesus is with us in his words, and that means clearly and unequivocally that he is in that which he wants and in that which he thinks about us. He is with us with his will, in his words, and only in our dealings with Jesus' words do we sense his presence. The word, however, is the clearest and most unequivocal means of expression by which thinking beings connect. If we have a person's word, then we know that person's will; indeed, we know the whole person. If we have Jesus' word, then we know his will and his entire person. Jesus' word is always one and the same and yet is also always different. It tells us: You are standing under God's love, God is holy, and you should also be holy; God wants to give you the Holy Spirit that you might also be holy.

And it says this in different ways to every person in every moment. God's word is one thing to a child and another to a man, one thing to a boy and a girl, something different to a man and a woman, and yet there is no age, no moment in life when Jesus's word does not have something to say to us. Our entire life stands under that word and is sanctified by that word. From baptism to the grave, the word of the church accompanies us, places us under the assurance of the word: Remember, I am with you.

As a symbol of this situation, the church places the decisive stages of a person's life under the church's own proclamation. To young children, Jesus' word is already proclaiming how God's grace comes before all human actions; it then speaks to children of the sanctity of their parents' love. To older children at play it speaks about God's truthfulness, about God's seriousness and goodness, about service as Christ's followers, about heroic

deeds and knightly deeds. To the young adult it speaks about the sanctity of the divine commission and about eternal goals, opening that person's eyes to the glory of the world, to a yearning to roam beyond the temporal; and the word tells of the purity of God and of the heart. To young people it speaks about much joy and cheerfulness, though also about what they owe to the prospect of marriage and parenthood. To mature adults the word speaks about the seriousness of work, about fate and guilt, about responsibility and loyalty and about God's will that each of us might take hold of our own life and shape it. The word also tells how God has sanctified motherhood and fatherhood. To the elderly it speaks about that world from which death separates us and about the last things. And yet it speaks one and the same thing to both the young and the elderly, namely, that God loves you and is with you, depend on it. And the other thing: God is holy, and you should also be holy; the word about God's ineffable compassion is spoken to people of all ages, as is the word about God's seriousness and beneficence in every moment of human life.

Remember, I am with you. . . . This applies *whether we want it to or not*. Are there any moments when we might not want it? Moments when God's presence is irksome to us? We all know there are such moments; these are the moments of God's judgment upon us. God is with us—suddenly the consequences of this word become transparent. If God is with us, and yet we are not with God—what happens then? Let us once more follow this notion in all seriousness all the way to its conclusion. No respected man of the world, no prophet, no prince of the earth comes to us and abides perpetually with us; but the prince of life and of the whole world is with us with his judgment and his claim on us. Can we do justice to this claim? And even if we wanted to revolt or resist, God is there always, to the end of the world. The blissful notion that God once again dwells among human beings, that God once again lends meaning to human life, that the world is full of God, this notion becomes threatening and frightening precisely because it demands responsibility. Our life and action are not to be meaningless; but what if we live our lives in apathy and thoughtlessness? Every age in life has its divine destiny. What if we ignore that destiny? Every moment of our life is related to God. What if we wish to sense nothing of that relationship?

Thus a heavy burden is suddenly placed upon us, once we take seriously the statement "Remember, I am with you. . . ." But the God who

assigns also gives and forgives. Where God's judgment is, there also is God's grace. Did God come into the world and live life in the world in order to ruin that world? No. God wants to give to the life of the world as much of the divine life as the world wants; God wants to draw close, into blessed partnership, those who are lonely and all who seek life with God. "I am with you always. . . ." God lives, lives in the world, lives for the world, lends it meaning and life, makes it our home, gives our own life a relationship to eternity and a closeness to God—that is the grace we take with us from this passage.

But one more thing. One profound element in the fairy tale we mentioned earlier is that it has God move about among human beings as a human being. This promise, too, has become a reality. Jesus Christ is not only with us in lonely hours; Jesus Christ also encounters us in every step we take, in every person we meet. Remember, I am with you . . . Jesus Christ, God himself, speaks to us from every human being; the other person, this enigmatic, impenetrable You, is God's claim on us; indeed, it is the holy God in person whom we encounter. God's claim is made on us in the wanderer on the street, the beggar at the door, the sick person at the door of the church, though certainly no less in every person near to us, in every person with whom we are together daily. "Just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me," Jesus says [Matt. 25:4].

I am for you, and you are for me is God's claim, God's very self; in this recognition, our gaze opens to the fullness of divine life in the world. Now life in the human community acquires its divine meaning. This community itself is one of the forms of God's revelation. God is with us as long as there is community. The most profound meaning of our ties to social life is that through it we are tied all the more securely to God. Remember, I am with you always, to the *end of the world*. Again we hear about the last things. "I am the first and the last" [Isaiah 41:4; Revelation 1:17], "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" [Hebrews 13:8]; such are the words we hear. Jesus is Lord of the ages and is always with his own, even when things are difficult, and will abide with us; that is our comfort. If tribulation and anxiety come upon us, Jesus is with us and leads us over into God's eternal kingdom. Jesus Christ is the breadth of our life and of our community. Jesus Christ is with us to the end of the world. This is the gift of Easter.