

Sitting on the Sidelines

Luke 3:17- 23, January 7, 2007

by the Rev. Dr. Gay Lee Einstein

You know how it is sometimes—something happens that is beyond coincidence—something that really belongs in the twilight zone. For instance, you are thinking about a friend you haven't heard from in a year or two, wondering what in the world ever happened to him, or to her—and then the phone rings and it's that very person! Or, as once happened to me, I was in my car, stopped at a stop light in McLean, at the intersection of Lewinsville Road and Dolley Madison Blvd, worrying about what the future had in store for me. I was not happy at work, and my marriage wasn't working out. I noticed that the license plate of the car ahead of me read P-S-L-M 139. When I got home I read that Psalm through and it turned out to be the very Psalm I needed to read at that particular moment in my life. Go home and read it today. Maybe like me, you will find in that scripture some words of assurance: "God is with you no matter what; God knows what you are going through; God loves you."

Frederick Buechner, the acclaimed writer and preacher, has a license plate story kind of like that: He was sitting in his car by the side of a highway not too far from his home. He had pulled over because he was too overwhelmed with concern to concentrate on the road. His daughter had been struggling with anorexia and it had reached an acute stage. As he sat there worrying about his daughter's health, a car whizzed pass. Its license plate read, T-R-U-S-T. As Buechner tells it, "Of all the entries in the lexicon of words that I needed most to hear, it was that word *trust*. It was a chance thing, but also a moment of epiphany /revelation- telling me, 'trust your children, trust yourself, trust God, trust life; just trust.' "

What Buechner calls epiphany, the rest of us call serendipity or providence. They are chance happenings or, if you prefer, signs from above, that may lead you in a new direction, or simply affirm for you a path you are already on. Something like that happened this week as I tried to work with today's scripture. The New Testament text from the lectionary is the one I read to you about John the Baptist. This week, though, besides thinking about John the Baptist, his imprisonment by the Emperor Herod, his time in prison and his untimely death, I have also been reading about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for our Wednesday night book group. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a professor of religion in Germany before WWII. He was eventually imprisoned for his undercover anti-Nazi work. After spending two years in a Tegel prison in Berlin, he was hung by the Nazis eleven days before Germany capitulated to the Allied forces.

Even though they lived in radically different times, do you see, as I see, a similarity in these two men's lives? Both spoke or acted against the prevailing political regime; both were imprisoned; both were martyred. Of course you do! So, you will understand why, as I tried to concentrate on John the Baptist for today's sermon, he would morph into a 20th century German theologian. My reading on the one was definitely influencing my reading on the other. As I sat in my lectionary group meeting this week, my head in my hands, trying to convince my colleagues and myself that I needed to chuck Luke altogether and turn to a fat and juicy Old Testament passage, I glanced down at my church calendar. Do you know what today is according to this? It is the "Day of Prayer for Those Persecuted and Martyred for Their Faith." I was suddenly in the Twilight Zone! It was preordained. I was meant to preach on the martyrdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and some how relate that to John the Baptist, on this day of remembrance for Christian martyrs!

One more bit of epiphany or serendipity for you. As I read the final pages of Bonhoeffer's book, "Letters from Prison," Bonhoeffer mentions St. John the Baptist, who he refers to as Saint John the Baptist, but in a negative light. He refers to him as an ascetic. Bonhoeffer says in that same section of the book, that he is NOT an ascetic. It is as if for a moment Bonhoeffer stepped from the page to address me personally: "I know what you're thinking, but you have it wrong. I am not at all like John the Baptist. Be sure to put that in your sermon!" So what do you do with that? A theme for my sermon suddenly emerged! How is Dietrich Bonhoeffer different than John the Baptist?

All of this is a long way of explaining why I am preaching on Dietrich Bonhoeffer today with a little John the Baptist thrown in. It is not my choice, it is, rather, my calling.

Let us start then, by looking at the life of John the Baptist, before turning to our real topic for today, the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Saint John the Baptist. We know that he lived on the edge of society - in the wilderness. If life in first century Judah was a football game between the Romans and the Jews, John stayed as far as possible from the playing field. He was camped out in the bleachers. That is because John wanted to lead a holy life. Holy is defined in my dictionary as "set apart by God." Holiness also, for John anyway, meant leading an austere life. For that reason, he never ate too much; He may not have slept on a bed of nails, but he did sleep on the hard ground and in a perverse way, he probably enjoyed it. He wasn't just a man who could hold his liquor; he did not drink at all. He was often angry, judgmental, condemning and so was his God. He preached that God would come to Jerusalem wielding a winnowing fork and an axe. Yes, God was ready to separate out sinners

from the rest—In fact, God was sharpening God’s holy axe ready to chop down anyone who was not part of God’s program. It is virtually impossible, from the information given us in the Bible, to imagine that John the Baptist ever laughed. Have YOU ever seen a sketch, painting or statue of a laughing John the Baptist?

Now let us turn to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer did not set himself apart from the world. As he says in his letters, he never aspired to holiness. Neither did he aspire to sainthood and living an austere life. From my readings, it is easy to imagine that Bonhoeffer enjoyed good food and good wine. He was engaged to be married. He enjoyed music, all kinds. He had many friends. He traveled widely. No bleachers or sidelines for him. Bonhoeffer was always in the thick of things. He was a major player, maybe even a star quarterback for a time, in the football game that pitted Nazism against the Allied forces and Nazism against the true church. And what of his God? Bonhoeffer’s God, as he says, “goes to every person in need. He feeds the body and spirit with his bread.” p. 168) His God suffers for the sake of the world, and if we are to be Christians, then we also must suffer for the sake of the world. He emphasizes that Christians do that by living IN this world, not outside it (page 169 of Prisoner For God)

You see the distinction. That is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer did not want to be associated with SAINT John the Baptist. Bonhoeffer was following the lead of Christ, who he believed, was also very much in the world; and who also was NOT an ascetic—and if you read your Bible, you know that what Bonhoeffer says is true. Have you ever wondered why we call Jesus the Christ, but we never refer to him as SAINT Jesus?

Bonhoeffer’s message about living in the world as opposed to living apart from it, is probably a good message for some people to hear and understand; It was particularly important for CHRISTIANS to hear during WWII in Germany. Most of the church had turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to the atrocities of the Nazis. In its attempt to save itself, it either supported Hitler or at least did nothing to stop Hitler. It is a message for some people to hear today Except....Except that I am not sure that living in the world as opposed to separating oneself from the world is a big issue with us, here at Cove Church. We do a lot here. We are helping raise the next generation of young people at our school and we do what we can to help migrant workers. Through Beth Neville’s work we are also doing something about poverty and illiteracy in far off Guatemala. We are doing a phenomenal amount of work in the world especially for such a little church. No, we are in the thick of things, just like Bonhoeffer suggested we should be.

What about ascetism? Well, in that regard, too, we are more like Bonhoeffer than a Saint John the Baptist. There may be some people some place in that need to hear a word against ascetism, but I don't believe that we need to here that! Would the ascetics among us please stand up and be counted! I didn't think so.

You know the interesting thing about Bonhoeffer? He wanted to be in the thick of things, but the last years of his life were spent in prison. How ironic! He was forced to the sidelines so to speak, despite his Christian ethic. Now maybe that DOES resonate with some of us, at least to a degree. Who among us, here at Cove, does not want to be active in the world? Who does not want to be the one who is making things better? Sometimes though, it's just not possible. I was thinking for instance: maybe you've got a loved one who is sick. You want to do everything in your power to make that person well, but you are powerless. So, you sit and watch and watch and sit and then sit some more. You are sitting on the bleachers, not by your own choosing, but because there is nothing more for you to do. Or maybe it's with a son or daughter who is having financial difficulties. Maybe you aren't financially able to do one darn thing to help them out. Again, you sit and watch and watch and sit and then sit some more. Maybe your health prevents you from full participation in life, or maybe it's just the day to day life circumstances that keep you from being as active as you'd like to be. It's no fun being on the sidelines of life. It's frustrating. It can be just as tiring, just as stressful as living in the thick of things..

The word we need to hear from Bonhoeffer here in this place may be how we are supposed to keep it together when we are not in the thick of things. How can we be faithful from the sidelines? What we can take from Bonhoeffer is that even in his restricted prison life he valued his relationships, leaned on his friends and leaned on God; he prayed a lot; read scripture a lot. He made friends with his enemies and served his fellow prisoners. In those ways and others he continued to live a life that was pleasing to God. What is true for him, can be true for us as well. Even when our circumstances prevent us from doing all that we would like, we can still continue to live a life that is pleasing to God, in our own small ways. Yes, maybe that is the word we here at Cove Church need to hear from Dietrich Bonhoeffer on this day in which we honor him and other Christian martyrs.

As I said earlier, Bonhoeffer did not consider himself to be of the same ilk as John the Baptist. They certainly DID lead different lives—An ascetic and a hedonist, well, not quite a hedonist, but you get my drift. Maybe in one way John and Bonhoeffer were very much alike. Both of them pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. It seems to me we can do the same

thing whether we are camped out in the bleachers or whether we are star quarterbacks. May it be so for you and for me. Amen