



## SMALL GROUP ADVENT READINGS AND QUESTIONS

Week Three of Advent

### Devotional Reading from “Learning From Jesus,” A Spiritual Formation Guide

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and martyr who is best known for his passionate opposition to the Nazi regime in Germany, has often been compared to John the Baptist. Bonhoeffer, a well-known teacher, spoke out from the pulpit and on the radio against the racist actions of Hitler’s government. He argued that the church had a responsibility to question an even reproach governmental leadership. Just as John the Baptist preached to a world that was expecting a very different type of Messiah, Bonhoeffer confronted a church, and indeed a German nation, that held a very different idea of what it was to be a Christian in the face of the ethnic discrimination and genocidal practices of the Nazi regime.

Bonhoeffer was surrounded by groups that bore a surprising similarity to the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ time. The German evangelical church split into two branches. The Reich Church was made up of “German Christians” who supported Hitler and had passed the Aryan Clause as church policy for ministers. The Confessing Church, on the other hand, denounced the Aryan Clause and other Nazi policies as un-Christlike. Members of the Reich Church were all too eager to fall in line with the policies of the ruling party so as to have their share of temporal power. But as the Nazis became more firmly entrenched in German society, even many members of the Confessing Church, concerned about keeping their hands clean in this messy situation, refused to speak out against the injustices done to their fellow Germans. Bonhoeffer, however, continued to speak out, especially against those Christians who claimed the Jews deserved mistreatment because they had killed Jesus.

In 1939 Bonhoeffer left the ever-worsening situation in Germany for a teaching position at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, but soon decided to return to Germany. He believed that those Germans who chose to leave Germany were making a grave mistake not working for God within their own society. As Bonhoeffer wrote in a goodbye letter to his Union Seminary colleague Reinhold Niebuhr, “I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.”

Back in Germany, Bonhoeffer became a double agent. While ostensibly working for the government, he joined a group of conspirators trying to overthrow the government. This group was much like the Zealots of John the Baptist’s day in its commitment to overcome the ruling power by any means necessary, but Bonhoeffer decided that siding with this group was the lesser evil. Their attempt to assassinate Hitler failed, and Bonhoeffer was arrested and put to death just weeks before the end of World War II.

Like John the Baptist, Bonhoeffer faced unexpected challenges and difficulties in his life. Their lives bore out a lesson Jesus taught us through his own life: God’s ways are surprising and unpredictable, and when we choose to follow him our lives bear the same characteristics. As the *Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible* puts it, “God’s coming in the person of Jesus Christ, from the babe and the carpenter to the cross and the resurrection, was totally unexpected and incomprehensible to human ways of thinking. This reminds us that God can never be tamed or domesticated. In fact, we need to be immediately suspicious of proposals and arrangements that make perfect human sense.”

John the Baptist and Bonhoeffer confronted the prevailing ideas of their time and suffered for it. Like John the Baptist, Bonhoeffer could be considered a failure: the assassination he planned with other Christians failed, he was unable to convince the Confessing Church to speak out against Hitler, and he was eventually executed for his role in the assassination plot. Yet Bonhoeffer’s life story and his writings have challenged and inspired countless Christians, both during and after his life. In killing him, the Nazi regime did not silence his powerful witness but strengthened it.

## Moment for Reflection

Jesus was not accepted as the Messiah by many people of his time because he simply wasn't the kind of messiah they had been conditioned to expect. He was more humble than kingly, he advocated practicing the spirit of the law rather than the letter, he confronted the culture rather than fleeing it, and perhaps most difficult to expect, he did not attempt to destroy Israel's enemies and bring power and glory to her people. Instead, he (and John the Baptist before him) asked the Jews to repent of their sins and to practice justice, humility, and kindness toward others. What a bitter pill to swallow.

We Christians often have an equally hard time with this aspect of Jesus. We prefer to think of him as first our buddy, the one who is on our side only, and second as a judge in warrior, who will exact revenge on the rest of the world when the time is right. Our ideas are no less wrong, no lesson complete than those of the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, and Essenes of Jesus' time. Each group made the mistake of emphasizing one aspect of the Messiah, which distorted the rest of the picture.

Living as we do in a world distorted by sin, none of us can be too smug about our knowledge of Jesus or feel that we have a lock on the truth. Jesus was constantly challenging the expectations of those around him. Just as none of us fully understands everything about Jesus, our Messiah, none of us can ignore his call to repent, to recognize and confess our sins and work to do better. His call can be hard to hear. It can be even more difficult to follow. As with Bonhoeffer, it may lead us down the road of pain and suffering, even death. Yet we do not go down that path alone. Jesus has gone before us.

### Scripture Meditation: Psalm 23

*Read this popular psalm at various times throughout your week (and as a small group when you meet). Consider: what aspects of this psalm stand out in a fresh way as a result of this week's devotional reading?*

### Music Meditation: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

*Find a version of this hymn and listen to it when you have a chance. The original lyrics and their explanation are on the next page.*

## Questions for Reflection

1. What parts of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's story stood out to you, and why?
2. While our context is certainly different from his, what elements of Bonhoeffer's story seem instructive and applicable for Christians in our context?
3. As a group, discuss the final paragraph in the "Moment for Reflection" section.
  - a. How does this paragraph convict or challenge you? How does it comfort you?
  - b. What might Jesus' call to endure *the road of pain and suffering* look like in our culture?
4. Have a group member read Psalm 23. Then, after a moment, have one or two group members read the lyrics of *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* and their description on the next page. Which words, phrases, or themes within the psalm or hymn resonate with you right now?
5. Share your prayer concerns as a group, then close your time together in prayer.

## O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

*There are many variations of this hymn. Here are the stanzas commonly associated with the original version.*

O come, O come, Emmanuel,  
And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here,  
Until the Son of God appear.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Key of David, come  
And open wide our heav'nly home;  
Make safe the way that leads on high,  
And close the path to misery.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free  
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;  
From depths of hell Thy people save,  
And give them victory o'er the grave.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Adonai, Lord of might,  
Who to Thy tribes, on Sinai's height,  
In ancient times didst give the law  
In cloud and majesty and awe.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Dayspring, from on high,  
And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh;  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
And death's dark shadows put to flight.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

*Can't get past the dated language? Here's the message of the hymn written in prose.*

Come quickly, Lord. Be true to your promise that you are “God with us.” Israel mourns because it remains in captivity and exile until the Son of God enters the world to save her. Rejoice, Israel, because the God who promises to be with you is coming. Rejoice!

Come quickly, Lord, and fulfill the promise made through the prophet Isaiah, “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him: the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord, and he will delight in the fear of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:1-2). God, free your people from Satan’s tyranny and the punishment of hell. Give them hope for eternal life that lasts beyond the grave. Rejoice, people of God, because the God who promises to be with you is coming. Rejoice!

Come quickly, God. You are the embodiment of hope— like the certainty of light that shines with each new morning! May the hope we have in you satisfy us even during our darkest moments as we walk through the shadow of death. Rejoice, all who are experiencing such a moment right now, because the God who promises to be with you is coming. Rejoice!

Come quickly, Lord. Fulfill your promise to establish an everlasting kingdom in the line of King David. You are the key and the only way into this kingdom. Your way is peace, and the world’s way is only despair. Rejoice if you long for eternal life, because the God who promises to be with you is coming. So rejoice!

Come quickly, mighty Ruler of all. You appeared before Moses and your people within a cloud on Mount Sinai, and you declared your goodness and majesty through your perfect Law. You were Emmanuel then, and you are Emmanuel still today. Rejoice, all who long for righteousness, because the God who promises to be with you is coming. So rejoice!