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Barcelona

March 1928—February 1929



ON FEBRUARY 15, 1928, Bonhoeffer was appointed assistant pastor to the German-speaking congregation in Barcelona. He left the children reluctantly, but looked forward to the opportunity of regular preaching. He had become very close to the children. In his diary in Barcelona he wrote:

On January 21, 1928 we had our last children's service. I spoke on the man sick with palsy, and particularly on the saying, "Your sins are forgiven you," and tried yet again to reveal the kernel of our gospel to the children. They were attentive and perhaps affected a little . . . For some time, the congregational prayer has often sent cold shivers down my spine, but when the throng of children with whom I have spent two years prayed for me, the effect was incomparably greater.¹

The Parish in Barcelona

Bonhoeffer suffered a culture shock when he began to meet the people of his first parish. He was the assistant minister, under Dr. Olbricht. This senior minister was well liked by his congregation, whom he did not trouble much apart from Sunday services and pastoral visits. He enjoyed their privileged company. It was left to the young assistant to start Sunday school work and even week-night meetings for lectures. The shock was to discover the complacency of these businessmen and even their

children. In a letter to his grandmother in June, contrasting the youth of Berlin with the youth of Barcelona's German community, he wrote:

They know little or nothing of the war, revolution, and the painful aftermath of these things, they live well and comfortably, the weather is always fine—how could it be otherwise? The Youth Movement period in Germany passed by without a trace here.²

All the young people seemed to assume that they would continue in their fathers' businesses and took this comfortable way of life for granted. The restless young pastor was soon stirring things up—not always to the approval of his senior. But it was preaching that concerned Bonhoeffer most. He had to get to know the country, the people, their problems, and their needs. He found himself spending a great deal of time preparing his sermons and writing them out in full.

“Writing sermons still takes up a great deal of my time,” he wrote to his parents, “I work on them the entire week, devoting some time to them every day.” Still, he was always pleased when the minister turned the pulpit over to him. “On the first Sunday in Advent I shall be able to preach again because Olbricht will not be returning until the following week, and I am very pleased about that.”³

This is the sermon with which the present collection begins.

December 2, 1928

Advent Sunday

"I stand at the door and knock" (Revelation 3:20).

Celebrating Advent means learning how to wait. Waiting is an art which our impatient age has forgotten. We want to pluck the fruit before it has had time to ripen. Greedy eyes are soon disappointed when what they saw as luscious fruit is sour to the taste. In disappointment and disgust they throw it away. The fruit, full of promise rots on the ground. It is rejected without thanks by disappointed hands.

The blessedness of waiting is lost on those who cannot wait, and the fulfillment of promise is never theirs. They want quick answers to the deepest questions of life and miss the value of those times of anxious waiting, seeking with patient uncertainties until the answers come. They lose the moment when the answers are revealed in dazzling clarity.

Who has not felt the anxieties of waiting for the declaration of friendship or love? The greatest, the deepest, the most tender experiences in all the world demand patient waiting. This waiting is not in emotional turmoil, but gently growing, like the emergence of spring, like God's laws, like the germinating of a seed.

Not all can wait—certainly not those who are satisfied, contented, and feel that they live in the best of all possible worlds! Those who learn to wait are uneasy about their way of life, but yet have seen a vision of greatness in the world of the future and are patiently expecting its fulfillment. The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come. For these, it is enough to wait in humble fear until the Holy One himself comes down to us, God in the child in the manger. God comes. The Lord Jesus comes. Christmas comes. Christians rejoice!

In a few weeks we shall hear that cry of triumph. But already we can hear in the distance the sound of the angels' song praising God and promising peace on earth. But, not so quick! It is still in the distance. It calls us to learn to wait and to wait aright.

When once again Christmas comes and we hear the familiar carols and sing the Christmas hymns, something happens to us, and a special kind of warmth slowly encircles us. The hardest heart is softened. We recall our own childhood. We feel again how we then felt, especially if we were separated from a mother. A kind of homesickness comes over us for past times, distant places, and yes, a blessed longing for a world without violence or hardness of heart. But there is something more—a longing

for the safe lodging of the everlasting Father. And that leads our thoughts to the curse of homelessness which hangs heavily over the world. In every land, the endless wandering without purpose or destination. Looking beyond our own comfort here, we see in many lands people dying of cold in wintry conditions. The plight of such people disturbs us within and amidst our enjoyment; a thousand eyes look at us and the evil haunts us. Poverty and distress throughout the world worries us, but it cannot be brushed away and there appears to be nothing we can do about it.

On this first Sunday of Advent, the two inescapable realities, which have been the subject of our thoughts over the last two Sundays, with which the Christian year ended, greet us now in this first Sunday of the new year. They weigh heavily upon our souls this day: sin and death. Who can bring help as we face these destructive realities? Who can deliver us from their dire effect? Only One! Our Lord delivers us from sin and death. Shall we not cry, as the first believers did, “Come Lord!” This is the ancient cry, “Maranatha,” and quickly come!

Soon we shall acknowledge that our Lord Jesus Christ comes into our world, into our homelessness, into our sin, and into our death.

Lord Jesus, come yourself, and dwell with us, be human as we are, and overcome what overwhelms us. Come into the midst of my evil, come close to my

unfaithfulness. Share my sin, which I hate and which I cannot leave. Be my brother, Thou Holy God. Be my brother in the kingdom of evil and suffering and death. Come with me in my death, come with me in my suffering, come with me as I struggle with evil. And make me holy and pure, despite my sin and death.

Every day, a quiet voice answers our cry, gently, persuasively, “I stand at the door and knock.”

Should we tremble at these words, this voice? The Spirit that we have called for, the Spirit that saves the world, is already here, at the door, knocking, patiently waiting for us to open the door. He has been there a long time and he has not gone away. His is a very quiet voice and few hear it. The cries of the marketplace and of those who sell shoddy goods are all too loud. But the knocking goes on and, despite the noise, we hear it at last. What shall we do? Who is it? Are we afraid or impatient? Perhaps we feel a little fear, lest someone undesirable is at the door, dangerous or with malignant intent. Should we open? In all this fuss, the royal visitor stands patiently, unrecognized, waiting. He knocks again, quite softly. Can you hear him?

And each of you may ask: Do you mean he is knocking at my door? Yes. First quiet those loud voices and listen carefully. Perhaps he knocks at the door of your heart. He wants to make your heart his own, to win your love. He would be a quiet guest within you. Jesus

knocks—for you and for me. It takes only a willing ear to hear his knocking. Jesus comes, for sure, he comes again this year, and he comes to you.

When the first Christians talked of the second coming of the Lord Jesus, they thought of a great day of judgment. That seems far removed from our thoughts of Christmas, but what the early Christians thought must be taken seriously. Surely it is true still that when we hear the knock of Jesus on the door, it smites our conscience. We fear that we are not ready for him. Is our heart ready for his visit? Is it fit to be his dwelling? The dwelling place of God?

Perhaps, after all, Advent is a time for self-examination before we open the door. When we stop to consider, the contrast between those early Christians and us is extraordinary. They trembled at the thought of God coming, of the day of the Lord, when Jesus, “Judge eternal, throned in splendor,” would shatter the complacency of all the world. But we take the thought of God coming among us so calmly. It is all the more remarkable when we remember that we so often associate the signs of God in the world with human suffering, the cross on Golgotha. Perhaps we have thought so much of God as love eternal and we feel the warm pleasures of Christmas when he comes gently like a child. We have been shielded from the awful nature of Christmas and no longer feel afraid at the coming near of God Almighty. We have selected from the

Christmas story only the pleasant bits, forgetting the awesome nature of an event in which the God of the universe, its Creator and Sustainer, draws near to this little planet, and now speaks to us. The coming of God is not only a message of joy, but also fearful news for anyone who has a conscience.

It is only by facing up to the fearfulness of the event that we can begin to understand the incomparable blessing. God comes into the midst of evil and death, to judge the evil in the world—and in us. And while he judges us, he loves us, he purifies us, he saves us, and he comes to us with gifts of grace and love. He makes us happy as only children know. He is, and always will be now, with us in our sin, in our suffering, and at our death. We are no longer alone. God is with us and we are no longer homeless. A piece of the eternal home is grafted into us. For that reason, we grown-ups can rejoice with all our heart around the Christmas tree—perhaps even more so than the children. We can see already the abundance of God's gifts. Just remember all the good things he has given us in the past year and, looking at this wondrous tree, feel secure in the promise of the wondrous home—the “safe lodging”—he has prepared for us. Yes, Jesus comes both with law and grace. Listen again, “Behold I stand at the door and knock.” Open the door wide! How often have you thought that to see Jesus would be marvelous, that you would give everything you have to know

that he was with you. Of course, you want more than to have him within you, you want him visible and in bodily form. But how can that be? Jesus knew that his followers would want to see him and have him by them in human form. But how can this be? He told a parable about this—the scene of the last judgment when he would divide the nations as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.

He said to those who were truly his flock of sheep, on his right hand:

Come you who are blessed by my Father . . . I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

When those on his right hand asked in surprise, “When? Where?,” he answered, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25: 34–40).

With that we face the shocking reality. Jesus stands at the door and knocks. He asks for help in the form of a beggar, a down-and-out, a man in ragged clothes, someone who is sick, even a criminal in need of our love. He meets you in every person you encounter in need. So long as there are people around, Christ walks the earth as your neighbor, as the one through whom God calls to you,

demands of you, makes claims upon you. That is the great seriousness of the Advent message and its great blessing. Christ stands at the door. He lives in the form of people around us. Will you therefore leave the door safely locked for your protection, or will you open the door for him?

It may seem odd to us that we can see Jesus in so familiar a face. But that is what he said.

Whoever refuses to take seriously this clear Advent message cannot talk of the coming of Christ into his heart. Whoever has not learned from the coming of Christ that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, has not understood the meaning of his coming.

Christ knocks! It is not yet Christmas. And neither is it yet the great last Advent, the second coming of Christ. Through all the Advents of our life, we shall wait and look forward with longing for that day of the Lord, when God says, “I am making everything new!” (Rev 21:5). Advent is a time of waiting. Our whole life is a time of waiting; waiting for the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Then all people will be as brothers and sisters, rejoicing in the words of the angels’ song: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14).

Learn to wait! For he has promised to come: “Behold, I stand at the door.” But now we call to him: “Yes, come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.”⁴