

9/12/2021 Sermon

*Moving Mountains with Human Hands*

Sometimes it's better to decline an invitation, or so I thought after the event I am about to share with you.

A few years ago now, a good friend of mine and fellow pastor was organizing a weekend retreat for members of her church to be held at Holden Village on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor involved in the assassination plot against Hitler who died at the hands of the Nazis just before the end of the Second World War.

"We want you to lead the retreat given your background in theology," my friend wrote to me in an email. "Is this something you'd consider?" "Absolutely," I remember replying. Bonhoeffer had become one of my favorites since I became a faculty member at Seattle University where I was teaching at the time. Not only did he play an important role in the German resistance against the Nazis. He also wrote some incredible theology while in prison shortly before his execution in 1945.

The theology in question appeared in a series of letters Bonhoeffer sent to friends and family while he was incarcerated by the Nazis in Berlin between 1943 and 1944. These documents contained explosive material concerning the nature of God, the person of Jesus Christ, and the mission of the church in an increasingly secular age.

In America, Bonhoeffer's papers and letters from prison gained notoriety after their translation into English under the title *Prisoner of God*, the original hardcover edition of which sells for nearly \$600 today!

Since then, much cheaper translations have thankfully appeared. This made it a lot easier to include several of his letters in a course I began teaching in 2010 on the question of what it means to be a person of faith living in a context like the Pacific Northwest, where church attendance had been in steady decline for decades. What an opportunity, I thought after my friend emailed, to examine these

letters with a church group. Maybe in Bonhoeffer we could find a guide for living in what he called a “world come of age,” that is, a culture in which “God” had been outgrown by adults who felt they no longer needed Him.

There was, however, one catch: the average age of the group’s participants was 13, and none of them had ever heard of Dietrich Bonhoeffer!

## **The Challenge**

Now don’t get me wrong. One of the most gratifying teaching experiences I have had has been working with our confirmation students here at Queen Anne Lutheran, most of whom are about the same age as the young people who attended the retreat. At the time, though, I spent the vast majority of my time teaching college students as a professor during the week and older adults in churches on the weekends. The prospect of working with such a young group accordingly made me a little nervous, but I decided to do it anyway.

I’m so glad I did.

The retreat went smoothly for most of the weekend. I enjoyed the group, the surroundings, and the topic. But then it happened. During one of the last sessions, I met some emotionally charged resistance to the subject matter, the kind of which rarely, if ever, appeared in the college classroom. The topic was God, and one of the students had a huge problem with the way Bonhoeffer depicted Him.

Bonhoeffer, you may recall, spoke in a daring way about God’s helplessness, weakness, and vulnerability on the cross. “Only a suffering God can help,” he wrote in one of his letters. One of my seminary professors, influenced by Bonhoeffer, put it like this: “A right understanding of the cross turns our conceptual world upside down, teaching us decisively that we do not understand who God is or how God works” (Lull, *Luther and Lutheranism*, p. 17). We expect to find

God in success and power, yet the cross reveals to us “God’s weakness,” as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:25.

“Why would I want to put my faith in a God of weakness?” I remember the student blurting in response. “I need a God who can fix my problems, not a God who hangs helplessly from a cross.”

Silence, as you might imagine, overtook the room. We all understood why: the young man who made the comment had named the elephant in the room. What point is there in worshiping a God who cannot step in when we need him, and how on earth, as Bonhoeffer suggested, can a suffering God *help us*?

Suddenly I wondered why I had accepted my friend’s invitation to speak! The question being asked was not merely an academic one. It came from the heart, and I had no idea how to answer it. I mean, in moments of desperation, who wouldn’t want the almighty Lord of the Universe to swoop in and provide rescue? By extension, who wouldn’t want a messiah consistent with what Peter expects in today’s Gospel, namely, one who can intervene and fix everything?

### **An Identity Issue**

Mark 8 conveys to us a crucial turning point in Jesus’ ministry. Up to this point in the story, Jesus had been traveling throughout the countryside, healing people of their diseases and making them whole again as a sign of God’s emerging kingdom. Obviously, people were raising questions about his identity in the process. Was he one of Israel’s former prophets, or perhaps John the Baptist come back from the dead? Or was he Elijah who, according to 1 Kings, never experienced death at all?

“Lots of people are asking about me,” we might imagine him saying to his disciples. “But who do you say that I am?”

What a strange question! Surely Jesus knows the answer. The subsequent verses illustrate that. Maybe it’s because, like any good educator, he wants to start with what his followers already knew.

Peter, the leader of the group, immediately responds. “You are the Messiah,” he declares. Jesus, in turn, accepts his reply, only to insist that those present refrain from telling anyone else. Scholars call this the “messianic secret.”

Why would Jesus hide his real identity? Was it a strategy to provide relief from the crowds or unwanted attention from the Romans? Or did Mark include it as a way gradually to reveal to Jesus was, the suffering savior whose full identity appears right after his death when the Roman centurion standing at the foot of the cross affirms that “[t]ruly this man was God’s Son” (15:39)?

For whatever reason, the disciples refrain from probing why Jesus insists they tell no one. Yet when Jesus proceeds to foretell the suffering and rejection he will endure at the hands of Judah’s religious leaders, Peter decides he’s had enough! He takes Jesus aside and rebukes him.

What made Peter upset? I suspect it was the same thing that inspired the young man at Holden to speak out against Bonhoeffer. Neither he nor Peter heard what they wanted to hear. Peter wanted a winner, a triumphant leader and messiah, not the “man of sorrows” or the “suffering servant” who would suffer defeat.

Is it surprising, therefore, that when Jesus was arrested by the authorities, his followers fled to avoid capture? Is it surprising that Peter denied him three times, and is it surprising that he died without them being nearby? Who would want to pick up their cross and follow a vulnerable, suffering savior? No wonder they ran away!

## **Divine Things**

Jesus’ rebuke of Peter serves as one of the most important moments in his ministry. He is not the messiah anyone expected. Something different appeared to be unfolding before their eyes, and Jesus helped them see it by differentiating “divine things” from “human things.”

Let me explain.

When we defend our view of God in terms of power and might, we ignore the way God has revealed Himself to us in Jesus Christ. Perhaps we don't want to hear it. After all, what use do we have in a God whom Paul associates with weakness? Why, moreover, speak of God as the "fellow sufferer who understands," as one modern philosopher puts it, when it's so much easier to believe in a God of raw power, even if we can't explain why this all-powerful God refrains from intervening in all sorts of atrocities, including multiple genocides costing millions of people their lives throughout the last century?

Naturally, the Bible offers some precedent for thinking of God in terms of power. The appearance of God in Jesus Christ, however, should give us pause. For it is within these circumstances, particularly in his death on the cross as well as his conversation with Peter in today's Gospel reading, that the power of love (God's power) replaces the all-too-human "love of power" (Keller, *On Naming the Mystery*, p. 98).

We need, in other words, to rethink our understanding of God and God's power based on who God has shown Himself to be for us in Jesus Christ. Otherwise, we set our mind on "human things" and miss the presence of God in our lives.

## **Next Steps**

So how do we live before the vulnerable God? As Paul, Martin Luther, and Bonhoeffer all affirm, we must seek God in places we wouldn't expect, in the face of the poor, for example. We should also be mindful of our reliance on God in times of our own vulnerability and pain, "for [God's] power is made perfect in our weakness," as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:9. God does not cause our suffering, but hopefully we can learn to depend on God in these moments.

When Bonhoeffer remarks that "only a suffering God can help," I suspect he refers here to what I would call the power that empowers. Relying on God and no longer simply trusting in ourselves, especially our fleeting gifts and abilities, we can sometimes do far more than we

expected. The power that motivates us becomes noticeable when this happens. Where does it come from? It comes from God.

God's power to empower was the power that sustained Paul in the face of persecution, Luther in the midst of hardship, and Bonhoeffer in a time of hopelessness. It compels us to do God's work, to help the widow and orphan in distress, and comfort those who mourn yet with our hands! Waiting for God to intervene often means none of these things gets done!

The power of God, we discover, exists even though it remains counter intuitive. It explains Peter's protest as well as the student's reaction to Bonhoeffer at Holden. We can experience it, however, only when we give up our thirst for power, our need to control.

Let us place our mind on divine things by letting God be the One whom God has revealed Himself to be, so that we can live by a different power, a power that can move mountains but with human hands. May each of us learn to rely on this power, and may the strength of God's power strengthen us to live more fully, to love more fully, and to serve more fully.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.