

Christmas 2008

December 24, 2008

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in my eyes, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

For behold I bring you tidings of great joy, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior who is Christ the Lord.

I have never been much of a Tom Cruise fan. Okay, so maybe "Rain Man" was pretty good.

But with the movie *Valkyrie* opening tomorrow, I found myself drawn back to some of the writings of the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

This probably seems like a strange connection.

What could a German Theologian and Mr. Top Gun possibly have in common?

Well the movie *Valkyrie* tells the story of the brave men and women who took part in the plot to assassinate Hitler at the end of the World War II.

And Bonhoeffer, a leader in the anti-Nazi Confessing Church, took an active roll in the conspiracy to murder Hitler and overthrow the Nazi party.

The coup failed (hope that doesn't spoil the movie for you) and the Gestapo executed over 4,000 people for their involvement.

Bonhoeffer himself was martyred a few days before his concentration camp was liberated in early April 1945.

While in prison, many of his writings were smuggled out by his friends. These were edited together and published after the war in a book entitled, *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

And through the years, his reflections have been a profound influence on my own life and ministry as a priest.

On December 17, 1943 he composed the following letter to his parents reflecting on what Christmas meant to him.

*“Of course, you can’t help thinking of my being in prison over Christmas, and it is bound to throw a shadow over the few hours of happiness which still await you in these times.*

*All I can do to help is to assure you that I know you will keep it in the same spirit as I do, for we are agreed on how Christmas ought to be kept.*

*For a Christian there is nothing peculiarly difficult about Christmas in a prison cell. I daresay it will have more meaning and will be observed with greater sincerity here in this prison than in places where all that survives of the feast is its name.*

*That misery, suffering, poverty, loneliness, helplessness and guilt look very different to the eyes of God from what they do to man, that God should come down to the very place which men usually abhor, that Christ was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn—these are things which a prisoner can understand better than anyone else.*

*For the prisoner, the Christmas story is glad tidings in a very real sense. And that faith gives the prisoner a part in the communion of the saints, a fellowship transcending the bounds of time and space and reducing the months of confinement here to insignificance.*

I have always loved the way that Bonhoeffer is able to describe the true meaning of Christmas.

He is so good at trimming away the frivolous trappings of the season.

And he speaks directly to our hearts when he writes about how the suffering, poverty, and loneliness of our lives give our joy in the birth of our savior a bittersweet quality.

Bonhoeffer lived in dangerous times. “Certainty” was a luxury he could not afford. He knew better than most that human life offered few guarantees especially when confronting evil.

And yet he refused to give into despair. He recognized that Christmas tells the story of how a loving God brings hope and purpose to a world that still desperately longs for glad tidings.

In his day it was the tyranny of the Nazi regime but in our day it could just as easily be the burden of fore-closures, political corruption and Ponzi schemes.

Bonhoeffer reminds us though that God's way of working in our lives is most evident in the Christmas event itself, when God came to a place that most people would have, as he writes, *abhorred*.

That the "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" would humble himself and be born in a common stable reveals the depth and fullness of God's love for us.

And we are reminded in the glad tidings of the Christmas story that God is always able to enter a world of uncertainty and to restore the hopes and dreams of God's people.

As Bonhoeffer wrote, "For the prisoner the Christmas story is glad tidings in a very real sense. And that faith gives the prisoner a part in the communion of saints, a fellowship transcending the bounds of time and space and reducing the months of confinement here to insignificance."

*For us to live Christmas as more than just the name of a feast*, we must come to terms with our own brokenness, our imprisonment, and even the type of self-loathing that prevents us from seeing the depth of God's love for us.

The Christmas story at its core is good news to broken people who long to be made whole.

It is message of hope sent out across the ages and centuries of time.

It reminds us that even in our present state of physical, emotional or spiritual brokenness that our God is ready to release us from the self-destructive behaviors and addictions that rob life of true meaning.

This is a night of invitation, a night which celebrates the start of a new beginning when God renews the relationship that started all the way back at our creation.

This is the night when God like the Father of the prodigal son parable, stands on the porch, looking out into the cold dark night, waiting expectantly for his sons and daughters to see the light and to finally come back home.

It is my prayer that tonight you will see the great light of God's love, calling out to heal the pain that dwells in your heart, and that you will find a new beginning and a new way to fulfill the dreams and hopes that God has for you.

Tonight we are all welcomed guests at a stable in Bethlehem, our imprisonment is over, the new life has begun, let us rejoice and give thanks for God's greatest gift.

Amen