

*Deuteronomy 18:15-20*

*Psalm 74:1-11*

*word count 1524*

*Please go to the end of the sermon to see the contrasting pictures of idol worship—the golden calf of Aaron, and the golden bull of Wall Street.*

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer** was born on February 4, 1906. He was a German Lutheran pastor, theologian, author, and most notably, a conspirator in one of the many plots to kill Hitler, for which he was imprisoned and hanged on April 9, 1945. He was a prophet for his time, speaking out against a church that had embraced evil for safety's sake, and risking his life to save Germany from itself when to do so meant he would be labeled a traitor.

**The hymn we just sang** is from a poem he wrote during his last days in prison just before his execution:

**By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered,  
And confidently waiting come what may,  
We know that God is with us night and morning,  
And never fails to greet us each new day.**

**It was put to music** for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth in 1976, and the tune is called, "Bonhoeffer."

**Next week**, we will present a play in our sanctuary. It was written by the Rev. Art Cribbs, pastor of our UCC in San Marino. The play, called, "Awaiting Judgment," is about the mythical meeting in jail of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The conversation is between two men who are jailed for very different reasons—one for non-violent opposition to injustice, and the other for taking part in a plot to assassinate Hitler. The play was performed at our General Synod in 2007 for all of our UCC churches, and again last summer at our local annual conference.

**King is a major prophet for our times**, but so is Bonhoeffer, and the occasion of his birthday, so close after King's, is an opportunity to look at what it means to be a Christian in a time when religion is conflated with ideology and false idols. The choice to present the play during this time in the church year was intentional on my part.

**The lesson from Deuteronomy** is about the raising up of prophets among the people themselves rather than from the status quo: in particular, this passage is about Moses as prophet and leader of a new nation, who will begin the work of delivering his people to a new state.

**If you remember**, Moses has come down from the mountain once before and found the people acting in ways that were in imitation of old traditions, imbedded in their hearts due to cultural norms of the day. They asked Aaron to make an idol they would worship, and he created the golden calf.

**We think of this** as being a piece of ancient history—that we are too far removed and advanced today to repeat this kind of idolatry, except that it was recently not only repeated, but also magnified.

**Lawrence Wood**, writing in the latest issue of Christian Century, observed, "Did you see the Christians who laid hands on the golden bull of Wall Street, praying for God to bless the economy? A guest on Pat Robertson's 700 Club called for prayer groups 'to intercede for banks and financial institution.' 'I'm not a prosperity preacher, I'm a prophet,' she (the guest) said.

‘God is saying that...you must connect to his economic system.’ (And so,) This past October 29, a crowd of believers fervently prayed over the golden statue.”<sup>1</sup> I will post photos on our website with the sermon this week of a painting of Moses’ people worshiping the golden calf, next to the photo of American Christians laying hands on the giant statue of a golden bull on Wall Street, and you tell me what is the difference between them. In fact, our bull is a much larger and more impressive an idol than the one Aaron was able to fashion.

**Bonhoeffer rejected** the conflation of Christianity with ideology, economy and nationalism. The way of Jesus was for him, a very personal and difficult path. It involves standing against great powers at very personal risk, even when those powers believe they are representing faith and culture.

**Bonhoeffer** sailed off to New York to teach during the rise of Nazism in Germany. Then, like Jonah, he sailed back to Ninevah to be the prophetic voice he was called to be.

**In his work**, “The Jewish Question” written in 1933, he said,

“**The church has three possible ways** it can act against the state. First, it can ask the state if its actions are legitimate. Second, it can aid the victims of the state action. The church has the unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering society even if they do not belong to the Christian society. The third possibility is not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to jam a spoke in the wheel itself.”

**Bonhoeffer tried to jam a spoke in the wheel** of Nazi Germany by helping to create and carry out a plot to kill Hitler. He said that if you see a lunatic driving towards a crowd of people, you have a moral obligation to wrest the steering wheel away from the lunatic, even if it means killing him.

**When Bonhoeffer’s bible** was recovered after he was hanged for his actions, there appeared only one notation in it, which was around the 74<sup>th</sup> psalm, included in today’s readings. Read it again, and think of what it was like to be a Christian in Germany at this time, walking by the burned out synagogues and closed Jewish businesses. To direct your steps to the perpetual ruins where the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary, roared within those holy places and set up their emblems of red and black, hacking down the wooden decorations within. What responsibility do you have as a Christian when it is your own people who have done such harm? How do you act as a Christian when the church has invited these same emblems into their own sanctuaries by bishops, priests, and pastors?

**After** the liberation, Bishop Albrecht Schoenherr, himself a prisoner, wrote,

“**Only gradually** did I begin to sort out what happened. I wondered in what ways and how much I had complied with that terrible business which ended on that day in May. I was not a Nazi. I gave the Nazis a little bit of resistance in the Confessing Church. Yet it became clearer to me that I had not achieved any kind of moral victory. My conscience was not clear. I knew that when God asks me, ‘Where is your Jewish, your homosexual, your gypsy, your communist, your Polish, your Dutch brother Abel?’ I would have nothing to say.”

**Last week**, the Pope issued a decree welcoming back into the church Richard Williamson and three other breakaway bishops excommunicated by John Paul II in 1988. These are holocaust deniers and endorsers of “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.”

**Catholics fear** it will deal a fatal blow to the inter-faith dialogue promoted by his predecessor.

**What does a Christian do** when even the church he or she loves behaves in a way that moves away from the path of Christ?

**Bonhoeffer wrote:**

**“Our church,** which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and the world. Our earlier words are therefore bound to lose their force and cease, and our being Christians today will be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action among men. All Christian thinking, speaking, and organizing must be born anew out of this prayer and action.”

**I feel much like Bonhoeffer** might have in his own day about the direction his church took.

**Many of you come** from different expressions of Christianity. Some of you think of yourselves as “religious refugees.” Not less than three sets of visitors who now attend came here because you walked out of your churches, of different denominations, because a sermon was being given that marginalized and denounced people who were different from the mainstream during this last election cycle, actually supporting the removal of civil rights of certain Americans.

**Others of you** with whom I have spoken refer to the places you left as churches where people were “quote-unquote” devout, conservative Christians.

**I have a radical suggestion for you.**

**You are the devout Christians in America today.** You are the people who, like Bonhoeffer, would risk your church and your understanding of faith for the way of Christ. Like Bonhoeffer’s “religion-less Christianity” yours is a faith that questions the status-quo rather than accept it at face value, asking rather, “What is the way of Christ?” Despite questions and doubts, never waver, religious refugees, in the belief that you bring with all of your questions and doubts, a faith that makes room for all within the realm of God towards whom you even now work, live and breathe.

**“And when this cup you give is filled to brimming  
with bitter sorrow, hard to understand,  
we take it thankfully and without trembling,  
out of so good and so beloved a hand.”**

**Come, dare to come to this table....**where whoever you are and wherever you come from, you are welcome still. Amen.

### ***Sermon Resources***

1. Lawrence Wood, “Reflections on the Lectionary”, February 1, 2009, *Christian Century*, January 27, 2009 issue, p. 18.

**Idolatry: Moses smashed the tablets because he found the people worshipping a false idol. This painting is called, “The Adoration of the Golden Calf, by Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665.**



**What is the real difference between these pictures? On October 29, 2008, Christians went and laid hands on the statue of the golden bull of Wall Street, prompted by a 700 Club (Pat Robertson) call to pray for “God’s economic system.” Couldn’t you do it in your living room? Do you need to go to the ACTUAL idol that represents a “bull market”? And...is it really, “God’s economic system?”**



**Scripture for Sunday, February 1, 2009**  
**Dietrich Bonhoeffer—Epiphany 4B**

**Deuteronomy 18:15-20**

15 The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. 16 This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." 17 Then the Lord replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. 18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. 19 Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. 20 But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die."

**Psalms 74:1-11**

1 O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? 2 Remember your congregation, which you acquired long ago, which you redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage. Remember Mount Zion, where you came to dwell. 3 Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins; the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary. 4 Your foes have roared within your holy place; they set up their emblems there. 5 At the upper entrance they hacked the wooden trellis with axes. 6 And then, with hatchets and hammers, they smashed all its carved work. 7 They set your sanctuary on fire; they desecrated the dwelling place of your name, bringing it to the ground. 8 They said to themselves, "We will utterly subdue them"; they burned all the meeting places of God in the land. 9 We do not see our emblems; there is no longer any prophet, and there is no one among us who knows how long. 10 How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever? 11 Why do you hold back your hand; why do you keep your hand in your bosom?