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Advent III

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There is an unspoken but iron sturdy commandment that parents can't help but obeying on behalf of their children. The first commandment of parenting: Thou Shalt Have a Thing. This is sort of how we talk about children now, describing their thing: well, Evan, he's our athlete; Lilly is our intellectual one; Helen, she's our musician – she's a confident player of violin...guitar.... and piano. What's your Thing? You need a Thing.

That Thing could be baseball, ballet, horseback riding, hockey, table tennis, good grades, getting into a "good" college, trumpet, trombone, tuba, debate team, chess club. It doesn't matter; there are as many Things as there are things. What matters is your child having some identity marker which separates them (and you) from the pack, which they (and you) can display to the world, and which grants them (and you) a Reason For Living.

I know about this intimately. Addie's been using her left hand using her fork – oh boy, the imagination can't help itself, will she be a creative-genius lefty (Mozart was left handed)? But OMG Katie did you just see her catch a ball, and then actually tried to dribble – I've checked 23 months is still too early to sign your kid up for basketball. But then there is her Fisher Price keyboard with about 8 keys which she's showing early signs of promise on – admittedly she plays it like she's the keyboardist in a heavy metal band. Not to worry, we're gonna help her find her thing.

The problem, of course, is this: we almost implicitly allow our children to attach their identities to things – those things could be grades, the school we got into, the job we have, the status and wealth of our parents – and we lose who we are in the process, confusing ourselves for a thing, a product, a commodity.

And so its no surprise that one of the most difficult question for younger people to answer these days is "Who are you?" It's a difficult question in 2023 because we are so inevitably caught up in publicizing our most brilliant, polished, curated selves on virtual platforms that claim to be reality, on a minute-by-minute basis.

To exist, to be a living breathing human being in 2023, is to be immersed in a culture of digitally-enhanced appearances, snap judgments, and fleeting connections. In our culture, so taken with the image, its hard to know who anyone else beneath the surface, not to mention ourselves. It's very hard to answer the question, "Who are you?" Instead, we're almost hardwired to answer the question, "Who can I persuade people I am?" What

we call successful people are those who've convinced a large number of the public that they're brilliant but unthreatening. And that's why successful people often find this question, "Who am I?", particularly hard to answer: because they've peddled their publicity so many times they've started to believe it themselves. We can deceive ourselves for a long time but at some point in every life, the interrogators come, just as they did to John the Baptist, and they demand to know not what your thing is but who you are. Of course, for John these interrogators were the religious leaders of his day; for us, the interrogator might simply be a voice inside our head, or the face looking back at us in the mirror. Who are you?

I love how John answers the question. "I am not..." "I am not..." It's a funny kind of answer. He repeats it several times. There's something almost aggressive about it. But that quickly makes sense when you realize that the people John's talking to are messengers from the very same crowd of leaders who'll put both John and Jesus to death two or three years after this conversation. This isn't an idle game of Twenty Questions, where only John knows the answer and everyone else has to guess and he takes delight in shaking his head and saying "Uh-uh." This is a cross-examination with John's head on the block. His life depends on his answer to this question.

Eventually John puts his interrogators out of their misery and gives them a straight answer. "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" These words are a quotation from the prophet Isaiah. They're a clear statement from John that he's well in line with the way God has worked over centuries and prepared Israel for this moment. But they also say a lot about John. They say what he is – a voice; where he is – in the wilderness; what he's doing – crying out; and what is really going on – the Lord is coming soon. John is asked the question, over and over again, "Who are you?" And his answer is, "I can't answer that question except in relation to God." Think about those words for a moment. "I can't answer that question except in relation to God." Is that your answer?

I want to tell you about someone you've probably heard of, and may even know a little bit about. And that's Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian, pastor, and ultimately martyr. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in Germany in 1906 into a very wealthy aristocratic family; his father was one of the first

ever doctors to practice psychiatry. Bonhoeffer's thing as a child, besides music, was his intellect. He excelled in school, blitzed through university, and graduated with his first doctorate at the ripe old age of 21 from the University of Berlin. His second doctorate would come when he was 24. Bonhoeffer was on a trajectory to become Germany's preeminent theologian, and quite possibly, the most significant theologian of the century, but that we'll never know because his life changed forever in 1933 when Adolf Hitler became Fuhrer. Given his costly discipleship to Jesus, Bonhoeffer spoke out against Hitler, decrying his anti-semitism, getting more and more involved in politics, until he would ultimately become enmeshed in an assassination plot on the Fuhrer.

He had plenty of opportunities to get out of Germany, and stay out, at least until after the war. Union Seminary in New York desperately wanted him on their faculty. He gave it a try, and enjoyed the leafy strolls through Central Park, but after only a two short weeks here, he wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr, "How can I participate in the rebirth of my country if I can't stand to bear its sufferings?" Who would I be if I stood apart from my people?

Bonhoeffer spent the late 30's and early 40's doing 3 things: 1) building up an underground church that could among other things help Jews escape the country 2) leaking intel out of Germany to various Allied contacts, and 3) writing some of the most potent spiritual literature of the century. Just after Bonhoeffer got engaged in 1943, he and his brother-in-law were arrested in 1943 and sent to Tegel prison, where he would spend the rest of his life, ultimately taken to the hangman's noose in 1945 just a few short weeks before the Allied liberation moved through. He was 39.

While in prison, Bonhoeffer comforted and consoled fellow prisoners; he was even a pastor to his guards. He'd served in pastorates in Germany, Barcelona in his early 20's, and London, but now at the end of his life, he had his toughest parish assignment: a prisoner among prisoners. When he wasn't leading Bible Studies or worship services, he was charting a new direction for Christianity, putting pen to some of the most generative and inspired words in all of Christian literature, published today as *Letters and Papers from Prison*. In his solitary cell, with very little contact with his family and his fiancée, Bonhoeffer began to wrestle with some of the deepest questions of all. Where is

God when God isn't there? How can one be a person of faith when faith has been co-opted by the state? How can one speak truthfully in a culture awash in propaganda? But perhaps the deepest question of these writings is this: Who am I? Just imagine a man born into wealth and cultivated as a child for greatness. An otherworldly intellect. A soon to be husband. A conspiracist. A man of faith. An incarcerated man. He wrote a poem that gave witness to how conflicted he felt.

Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a squire from his country-house....

Who am I? They also tell me
I would bear the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.
Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know of myself,
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath,
as though hands were compressing my throat,
yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness...

Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
fleeing in disorder from a victory already achieved?
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.

John the Baptist says, I don't know who I am apart from God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, Whoever I am – a pastor, a theologian, an activist – I belong to God. We don't call these people heroes, champions, or even saints. The word from the first chapter of John's gospel is "Witness." He came as a witness to testify to the light. Witness.

Indeed, we don't remember John the Baptist and Dietrich Bonhoeffer because of their successes, because they found and cashed in on their Thing. We don't remember them because they were simply nice people, fun to be around. We don't remember them because of their moral conviction or their executive presence. We remember them, and are even moved by them, because they bore witness to something bigger than themselves. They said, "I am not the light; I came to bear witness to the light." Witnesses realize that it is not about them; they don't need the spotlight, which allows the Light, the True Light, to flow through them. What is a witness? One theologian writes this: "To be a witness consists not in engaging in propaganda, nor even in stirring people up, but in being a living mystery. It means to live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist."

What is a witness? A witness says: The world is a mess; and yet God in God's mystery chose to be born into it; and therefore it is never just a mess, but bears the possibilities for God's healing transformation. A witness says: I realize it can't be happy for you right now, but we can try to make it beautiful together. A witness says: I know they did wrong, and I know everything in you wants revenge, but as I've realized how much God has forgiven me, I've discovered that there is another, gentler way for the world to be. A witness says: I know you are scared, and terrified at your prognosis; but God died a forsaken death so that we don't have to – I'll hold your hand all the way until you are holding God's. A witness says: they'll tell you to be efficient and productive, but God's gentle, everflowing grace has relaxed my productivity muscles and I'm wondering if it might for you too.

Witnesses are countercultural. Different. Living Mysteries. They walk through the world in a way that makes no sense if there is no God. Witnesses aren't guaranteed success, recognition, or great wealth. But guess what? Witnesses have something better: they know who they are; they know whose they are.

