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God's Call to the Prophetic

London, Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 21, 1934

In January of 1934, Bonhoeffer was serving two German congregations in London, having left Nazi Germany in October 1933 in frustration at his church's failure to stand up to the German Christians. The move to London, however, didn't remove him from the pressures at home. Only two weeks after preaching this sermon, Bonhoeffer was visited by his supervisor, Church Foreign Office director Theodor Heckel, who was soon to become a bishop. Heckel pressured the London congregations to remain true to the Reich Church, and when Bonhoeffer returned to Germany in 1935, Heckel personally warned the Gestapo to keep an eye on him.

In this sermon we can sense particularly that Bonhoeffer was wrestling with his new notoriety and his self-understanding of what role he should play in the church struggle. He was twenty-seven years old, and it's clear from his October 1933 letter to Karl Barth that the decision to leave Germany and take the pastorates in London had been a retreat: "I was becoming increasingly isolated..." he wrote Barth, "And so I thought it was about time to go into the wilderness for a spell, and simply work as a pastor, as unobtrusively as possible."¹ As this very autobiographical sermon makes clear, in London Bonhoeffer was confronting a deeper call to the battles back home.

¹ DBWE 13: London: 1933-1935, 23.

Jeremiah 20:7: O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.

Jeremiah was not eager to become a prophet of God. When the call came to him all of a sudden, he shrank back, he resisted, he tried to get away. No, he did not want to be a prophet and a witness for this God. But as he was running away, he was seized by the word, by the call. Now he cannot get away anymore, it's all up with him, or as one passage says, the arrow of the Almighty has struck down the hunted game. Jeremiah is his prophet.

It comes over a person from the outside, not from the longings of one's own heart; it does not rise up out of one's most unseen wishes and hopes. The word that confronts us, seizes us, takes us captive, binds us fast, does not come from the depths of our souls. It is the foreign, the unfamiliar, unexpected, forceful, overpowering word of the Lord that calls into his service whomsoever and whenever God chooses. Then it is no good trying to resist, for God's answer is: Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. You are mine. Fear not! I am your God, I will uphold you.

¶And then all at once this foreign, this faraway, unfamiliar, overwhelming word becomes the incredibly familiar, incredibly near, persuading, captivating, enticing word of the Lord's love, yearning for his creature. It has thrown a lasso over the person's head, and there is no getting away anymore. Any attempt to struggle only shows even more how impossible it is, for the lasso will only pull tighter, a painful reminder of one's captivity. So the person is now a captive and must simply follow the path ordained for him or her. It is the path of someone whom God will not let go anymore, who will never again be without God:

this means the path of someone who will never again, come good or evil, be Godless.

This path will lead right down into the deepest situation of human powerlessness. The follower becomes a laughingstock, scorned and taken for a fool, but a fool who is extremely dangerous to people's peace and comfort, so that he or she must be beaten, locked up, tortured, if not put to death right away. That is exactly what became of this man Jeremiah, because he could not get away from God. He was accused of fantasizing, being stubborn, disturbing the peace, and being an enemy of the people, as have those in every age even up to the present day who were seized and possessed by God—for whom God had become too strong.

¶Imagine how Jeremiah would have preferred to talk differently—how gladly he would have joined with others in shouting “Peace” and “Well-being!” where there was in fact strife and disaster. How happy he would have been to have kept quiet and agreed that they were right to say so. But he simply couldn't; he was compelled and under pressure, as if someone were breathing down his neck and driving him on from one prophecy of truth to the next and from agony to agony. He was no longer his own master, no longer in control of himself. Someone else had power over him and possessed him; he was possessed by another. And Jeremiah was just as much flesh and blood as we are, a human being like ourselves. He felt the pain of being continually humiliated and mocked, of the violence and brutality others used against him. After one episode of agonizing torture that had lasted a whole night, he burst out in prayer: “O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.”

God, it was you who started this with me. It was you who pursued me and would not let me go, and who always appeared in front of me wherever I went, who enticed and captivated me. It was you who made my heart submissive and willing, who talked to me about your yearning and eternal love, about your faithfulness and might. When I looked for strength you strengthened me; when I looked for something to hold onto, you held me; when I sought forgiveness, you forgave my guilt. I would not have wanted it thus, but you overcame my will, my resistance, my heart. God, you enticed me so irresistibly that I gave myself up to you. O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed. I had no idea what was coming when you seized me—and now I cannot get away from you anymore; you have carried me off as your booty. You tie us to your victory chariot and pull us along behind you, so that we have to march, chastened and enslaved, in your victory procession. How could we know that your love hurts so much, that your grace is so stern?

¶ You have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. When the thought of you grew strong in me, I became weak. When you won me over, I lost; my will was broken; I had too little power; I had to follow the way of suffering, I could no longer resist, I could no longer turn back; the decision about my life had been made. It was not I who decided, but you who decided for me. You have bound me to you for better or worse. God, why are you so terrifyingly near to us?

Today in our home church, thousands of parishioners and pastors are facing the danger of oppression and persecution because of their witness for the truth. They have not chosen this path out of arbitrary defiance, but because they were led to it; they simply had to follow it—often against their own wills and against their own flesh and blood.

They followed it because God had become too strong for them, because they could not withstand God any longer, because a door had closed behind them, and they could no longer go back beyond the point where they received the word, the call, the command of God. How often they must have wished that peace and calm and quietness would finally return; how often they must have wished that they did not have to keep on threatening, warning, protesting, and bearing witness to the truth! But necessity is laid upon them. “Woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!” God, why are you so close to us?

Not to be able to get away from God is the constant disquieting thing in the life of every Christian. If you once let God into your life, if you once allow yourself to be enticed by God, you will never get away again—as a child never gets away from its mother, as a man never gets away from the woman whom he loves. The person to whom God has once spoken can never forget him entirely but will always know that God is near, in good times and in bad, that God pursues him, as close as one’s shadow. And this constant nearness of God becomes too much, too big for the person, who will sometimes think, Oh, if only I had never started walking with God! It is too heavy for me. It destroys my soul’s peace and my happiness. But these thoughts are of no use; one cannot get away, one must simply keep going forward, with God, come what may. And if someone thinks he can no longer bear it and must make an end of things—then he realizes that even this is not a way to escape from the presence of God, whom he has allowed into his life, by whom he has been enticed. We remain at God’s mercy; we remain in God’s hands.

Yet at this very point, when someone feels unable to go any further on the path with God, because it is too hard—and such times come to each one of us—when God has

become too strong for us, when a Christian breaks down under God's presence, and despairs, then God's nearness, God's faithfulness, God's strength become our comfort and our help. Then we finally, truly recognize God and the meaning of our lives as Christians. Not being able to get away from God means that we will experience plenty of fear and despair, that we will have our troubles, but it also means that in good times and in bad we can no longer be Godless. It means God with us everywhere we go, in times of faith and times of sin, in facing persecution, mockery, and death.

¶So why be concerned about ourselves, our life, our happiness, our peace, our weakness, our sins? If only the word and the will and the power of God can be glorified in our weak, mortal, sinful lives, if only our powerlessness can be a dwelling place for divine power. Prisoners do not wear fancy clothes; they wear chains. Yet with those chains we glorify the victorious one who is advancing through the world, through all humankind. With our chains and ragged clothes and the scars we must bear, we praise the one whose truth and love and grace are glorified in us. . . . The triumphal procession of truth and justice, of God and the gospel, continues through this world, pulling its captives after it in the wake of the victory chariot.

Oh, that God would bind us at the last to his victory chariot, so that we, although enslaved and in chains, might share in the holy victory! God has persuaded us, become too strong for us, and will never let us go. What do our chains matter, or our burdens, our sins, sorrows, and death? It is God who holds us fast and never lets us go. Lord, entice us ever anew and become ever stronger in our lives, that we may believe in you alone, live and die to you alone, that we may taste your victory.

