

From Tegel prison in northwest Berlin, Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend Eberhard Bethege: A prison cell is a good analogy for Advent; one waits, hopes, does this and that—ultimately negligible things—the door is locked and can only be opened from the outside.

Each season of the church year focuses our attention on a specific aspect of the human experience. Advent is a season of life when we have limited agency, when we are forced to wait and hope. This season may be occasioned by a medical diagnosis, a child wandering into the far country, a parent meandering into the wilderness of Alzheimers, death of a loved one, a natural disaster, war or, as in Bonhoeffer's case, imprisonment.

Bonhoeffer was naturally gregarious and friendly. The guards were forbidden to recognize the humanity of their prisoners. Succumbing to despair was tempting and at a low moment suicide was even an option because Bonhoeffer considered himself to be “basically” dead. Instead of killing himself, he began to write.

From that cramped space designed to kill creativity and bury hope, during the dark nights and in the bleak mornings, against all odds, a book was being drafted. For fascination, influence, inspiration, and controversy, *Letters and Papers from Prison* is unmatched by any other book of Christian reflection written in the twentieth century.

Out of the bleak midwinter of his life, out of a dank, dark prison cell, seeds of hope and light and life continue to sprout in the lives of all who read the book, a book whose relevance has never been greater than at this moment in our history. Hardly a negligible thing!

The waiting of Advent is not passive, a posture of whatever will be, will be. Waiting is the first and primary discipline Paul calls the Corinthians to practice. Impatience wants to break open the fruit when it is still green on the inside. Whoever does not know how to wait—that is, of hopefully doing without—will never experience the joyful blessing of fulfillment.

The waiting of Advent is marked by hope. We wait with expectancy. And yet, hope can feel like a drug that must be carefully administered. Too much and we're setting ourselves up for disappointment or disillusionment. Too little and we're freighted with despair. We want the really real. We need true hope.

Kate Bowler is associate professor of American Religious History at Duke Divinity School. She and her husband had recently welcomed their first, long awaited child, when at age 35, she was diagnosed with stage four cancer. She became part of an experimental immune-therapy trial which proved successful.

She writes of her experience in two books: *Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I've Loved*, and *No Cure for Being Human, and Other Truths I Need to Hear*. She knows what it is to be forced to wait and hope in a culture that says anything is possible.

In those first days in the hospital, she couldn't see her son, couldn't get out of bed, couldn't say for certain she would survive the year. Yet, she felt as though she uncovered something so profound that she kept saying *I don't want to go back*. When she was sure she was going to die, she didn't feel angry. She felt loved.

At a time when she should have felt abandoned by God, she felt like she was floating on the love and prayers of all those who hummed around her like worker bees. As her hand was held she began to feel like her suffering revealed to her the suffering of others, a community of all those stumbling in the debris of their dreams.

This feeling of being enfolded in love lasted for months, so long that she panicked at the prospect of losing it. She began to ask friends, pastors, theologians, colleagues, and nuns she knew, *What am I going to do when it is gone?* And they knew exactly what she meant because they had either felt it themselves or read about it in great works of Christian theology.

All said, *Yes, it will go. The feelings will go. The sense of God's presence will go. There will be no lasting proof that God exists. There will be no formula for how to get it back. But when the feelings recede like the tides, they will leave an imprint. You will be somehow marked by the presence of an unbidden God.*

The Biblical writers and the saints throughout history have left us a common testimony: God never fully satisfies us in this world but instead continually stretches our desire. Not satisfaction but the expansion and purification of holy desire is the surest sign of God's presence with us.

For Barbara Brown Taylor *hope is like a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark.*

In the bleak midwinter of our lives, cold winds moaning, earth as hard as iron, water like a stone, hope sees what is invisible. Hope is the imprint left by the presence of an unseen God.