

Proper 14, Year C  
Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-13  
August 12, 2007

Trinity Episcopal Church  
Sonoma, CA

Wellsprings of a Cheerful Hope:  
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

The time – May, 1943.

The place – a cell in Tegel Prison, a prison in Berlin the Gestapo used for opponents of the Nazi regime.

There, in that cell, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor, a theologian and a steadfast opponent of Hitler, wrote a letter to a baby about to be baptized, a child who would bear the name Dietrich.

To this child born into a world gone mad, into a country taken hostage by barbarity, into a time, as Bonhoeffer put it, “become formless or even fragmentary....” (297), Bonhoeffer writes that “he looks forward to your future with great confidence and cheerful hope” (295).

How can that be? How can a realist like Bonhoeffer, sitting in a Nazi prison and living with eyes wide open, look forward with great confidence and cheerful hope to the future of a child born into a dissident family in Hitler’s Germany? Where does this hope in things not seen come from?

Perhaps we can find a clue in what Bonhoeffer goes on to write young Dietrich. He writes to his namesake, “In the revolutionary times ahead, the greatest gift will be to know the security of a good home.”

Home – the place we depart from and the place we return to at the end of the day; the place where we learn our deepest values; the place where we begin to grow into our true selves.

What a gift a good home is.

When we think of home, many of us think first of the home we were born to. Some of us may think of the home we are now making, the home we now live in. Others of us may think of our home among good friends – the place where we feel most comfortably ourselves.

Bonhoeffer was talking about the kind of home he grew up in, the kind of home his sister and her husband were making, the kind of home young Dietrich would encounter – a storehouse of spiritual values, a source of intellectual stimulation, a place of joyful music. Bonhoeffer was recalling the home of his childhood, remembering the home his youth.

But I wonder if he was talking about and talking from a different home as well. I wonder if Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from that prison cell, was really talking about his home in the heart of God. That place where he gains the courage and strength to live faithfully in dangerous times. That sure knowledge that God knows him by name and has prepared a place for him. That conviction that he rests in the hands of a loving and faithful God.

Like Bonhoeffer, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes to a people enduring abuse, experiencing persecution and facing prison, “we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith.... Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 10:39-11:1)

That assurance of things hoped for and that conviction of things not seen spring from a deep and intimate connection with God, a connection cultivated and nurtured in prayer. It comes from a deep settledness with God. "Faith, the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

This faith, this faith of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, this faith the author of the Letter to the Hebrews invokes, this faith that Jesus lives and calls us to, is not a static thing. It's not something to be held but rather something to live into and to live by. It's like a generator. It propels us to respond.

"By faith" Abraham responded to the call of God and set out for a new place.

"By faith he stayed in the land he had been promised living in tents. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

Faith calls us, as it called Abraham, into the future that is God's. It points us forward. Forward into service to others.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote his nephew, "our being Christian today will be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action..."(300)

We can only do that, we can only live a life of righteous action, when we make our home in the heart of God.

Let us look forward to our future with the "great confidence and cheerful hope" that comes from making our home in the heart of God. For we live and move and have our being in the hands of a loving and faithful God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison. New York: Touchstone, 1997.