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The name Dietrich Bonhoeffer is well known to many of you. This is the man who gave my first born son his middle name. For those of you who are not familiar with him, Bonhoeffer was a pastor and theologian who lived in Nazi-occupied Germany. He was eventually arrested for conspiracy and his participation in attempts to assassinate Adolf Hitler. He was imprisoned from 1943 to 1945, during which time he became engaged to the love of his life, Maria von Wedemeyer. During his years in prison, their love deepened and their connection to one another intensified. They longed to simply sit next to one another on his parents' couch and hold hands, as a free couple. However, this would never be, as Dietrich was executed at Flossenbergl concentration camp just one month before the end of the Second World War.

Maria never quite recovered from this. She eventually moved to the United States and carved out a career in mathematics and computer

technology. She married and divorced twice. She died in 1977, still deeply in love with the man whose hand she never got to hold except through prison bars.

They were an interesting couple, these two. Dietrich was a passionate theologian, an inspired student of the Bible and a fascinating preacher and author. Maria, on the other hand, was bored by theology, calling it an “incomprehensible discipline.” She deeply respected Dietrich, though, both for his dedication to academics and to his faith. When he was imprisoned, she became a most militant supporter of his, even going so far as to boldly drag a huge Christmas tree into the prison where he was held, right past the dumbfounded guards and into his tiny little cell, where it proudly stood throughout the holiday season. She sent him packages and letters as often as possible, so that eventually her Dietrich was surrounded on all sides by trinkets and treasures and stacks of handwritten correspondence from her.

She was bound and determined that he not feel alone, even though he was in solitary confinement. More than anything, she wanted him to feel surrounded on all sides by her warmth and her love...her spiritual presence, if not her physical presence.

One of the most fascinating details of Maria's correspondence to her Dietrich was that, whenever she wrote a letter to him, she would go to her room to write where she had outlined in chalk on her bedroom floor the exact dimensions of Dietrich's cell. She then sat and wrote from this tiny space, feeling closer to him because of her sharing his confinement, as best she could. She wrote to him from a an imagined cell outlined in chalk. He read her letters in a real cell made of cement blocks and iron bars,

This is an Advent image.

On one hand, we have a man in prison. He writes bold words of hope, and while he believes in the existential reality of his words—resurrection,

salvation, etc...--he is also acutely aware that his own death is imminent and inevitable. He knows he will die alone, and soon, and he knows there is nothing he can do about it. Even a thousand letters from Maria could not save his life.

On the other hand, we have a woman, living in the free world. She writes to her imprisoned love, voluntarily sharing in his confinement...choosing to share an existence in a prison cell, even if only in her imagination, for the sole purpose of sharing in his despair....so that he knows he is not alone. She yokes herself to him, binds herself to him...by choice, because of love.

This is an Advent image of humanity, desperately pacing back and forth in a prison cell from which the only escape is death. This is you and me, trapped in a cell of loneliness and isolation, whose only company is the voices in our heads telling us what miserable filth we are.

And finally this is an image of God, selflessly choosing to share in our misery by becoming like us. This is God, humbling himself like Maria did, sharing our existence by choosing to become a prisoner like us...by becoming human, just like us...by sharing our pain and our loneliness and our isolation and our despair....out of sheer love.

Tragically, Maria was not able to save Dietrich by showing solidarity with his imprisonment. Her writing to him from her self-imposed cell in her bedroom did not spare him from execution. It bolstered him emotionally, and it proved her love and devotion to him, but it did not save his life.

But God's choosing to become a prisoner like us *does* save our lives....God's choosing to become a human being like us—a broken soul wrapped in broken flesh—*does* give us life after prison, after death, after the condemning voices in our heads are finally silenced...then there is peace, there is eternal life, and there is freedom.

