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—**JONATHAN WILSON-HARTGROVE,** author of *Revolution of Values: Reclaiming Public Faith for the Common Good*

"In these pages, Reichel makes a compelling case to pay attention. This is a task of love and resistance, of hope and protest, of dreaming and remembering, of creating space and taking space. For those drawn to such a life-affirming call, this book is for you."

—**AMAR D. PETERMAN,** author of *Becoming Neighbors: The Common Good Made Local*

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

AN EMERGENCY DEVOTIONAL

HANNA REICHEL

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How to Read This Book

You can read the short chapters of this book as stand-alone lessons, meditations even. The "First Aid Kit" on page 137 directs you to individual themes and the chapters that treat them.

You can also read the chapters in sequence, as an interconnected course of study. Four parts of seven lessons each, plus introduction and conclusion, would give you a daily prompt over the course of a month.

You may read this book on your own, or with a group. The "Study Guide" on page 139 offers reflection questions, action prompts, and resources for further reading.

The book's four parts—or weeks—are arranged according to the liturgical order of a worship service: gathering, listening and responding, communion, and sending. So it is with this book: Part 1 allows you to arrive, reflect, and refocus. Once you have worked through your feelings and made space for discernment, part 2 invites you to listen and re-

spond, offering affirmation and challenge, instruction and cautions. Part 3 grounds you in the communion, worship, and core practices of Christian life. Freshly equipped, you are sent out again by part 4 into wider circles of solidarity and resistance, into uncertain as well as hopeful futures.

"We've been here before" applies not only to the diagnosis but also to the resources. There is nothing new in the individual lessons or the trajectory as a whole: They present the very foundational assumptions and practices of Christian faith, refracted through the light of this particular situation, illuminated by this particular cloud of witnesses. But maybe, presented in this way, old practices will appear in a new light and offer a renewed promise.

The voices and illustrations are primarily those of Christians in the mid-twentieth century who resisted National Socialist ideology and politics out of their religious convictions. I draw on these voices not because they are canonical figures or flawless moral exemplars, not because they are uniquely authoritative or the most radical and faithful voices out there. They are not.

They are simply what I have to offer to the current moment, based on my biographical background and my scholarly area of expertise—the contribution *I* can make to the table around which we are gathering. We will need many different sources of wisdom, experience, and insight in this conversation. I hope you bring yours as well.

What I observe from where I stand is only part of the picture. What is called for in one situation might be a disaster in another.

You will even find that some of the lessons stand in tension with one another, sometimes forming complementing pairs, sometimes taking the same idea into a different, or even opposing, direction. There are no unequivocal beliefs, incontestable conclusions, or cure-all recipes. I am not asking you to agree with what I say and go apply it. I am inviting you to reflect and ponder, put into perspective and complement.

Resolving all tensions is a hallmark of ideology. Easy answers and clear-cut solutions are what authoritarianism offers. Part of the task upon us today is to resist these lures.

We must build up tolerance for complexity. We must train our capacity to hold things in tension. We must exercise our communal ability for nuance and contestation. Everywhere, discernment will be needed. Only so can we do justice to reality and to one another.

Introduction

"There Is Nothing New Under the Sun," *or* We've Been Here Before

As a scholar, I have closely studied this nation. It prided itself in its influence in the world, its intellectual leadership, its technological innovation, its economic prowess. But as global orders shifted, its social and political system, built for simpler times, crumbled. Political and economic crises damaged trust in the government. Polarization increased and made coalition building ever less feasible. Widening gaps led to social unrest, economic instability, and even violence in the streets.

The nation was overwhelmed and disoriented. Betrayal by political opponents explained any defeats. Perceived humiliation turned into resentment, feeding a desire to "be great again." Political rhetoric shifted into ever more belligerent registers as enemies abroad and minorities at home were scapegoated. A muscular strength was projected out of swagger, false claims, and ever more overblown claims to greatness. Special leaders—claiming for themselves special powers—rode waves of public disgruntlement against

immigrants, intellectuals, and those visibly "other." Democratic processes were manipulated, checks and balances hollowed out. Executive overreach became the order of the day.

The nation I am talking about is Germany; the time is roughly a century ago. But maybe my description sounded familiar to you today. Maybe, like me, you find yourself thinking: We have been here before.

"There is nothing new under the sun," echo the words of the Teacher in my head, the anonymous figure of Ecclesiastes who is characterized as a wise man and previous king of Jerusalem (1:9). We have been here before. This insight creates disbelief, frustration, weariness, maybe even despair. But it does not mean that all efforts are in vain. It means that there is wisdom to be drawn from those who have gone through such times before. It means we are not alone.

I wrote my first book on Karl Barth, a Reformed theologian from Switzerland who lived and taught in Germany during the demise of the Weimar Republic and the Nazi rise to power. Barth was one of the early voices cautioning against the emerging political theologies of greatness and purity, of nationalism and militarism, and he became a leading voice in the Confessing Church, the portion of the German Protestant churches who resisted integration into the Nazi state.

My study focused on how Barth read inherited confessions of faith to ground his own confessing stance. Grounding himself in tradition gave Barth some distance from the turbulence around him and freedom to speak back to it

with force and authority. For Barth, *doing theology* was itself a kind of public witness: As an intellectual and communal practice of reflection that responds to God's word, theology has a word to offer to its own time, formed and informed by the wisdom of earlier times.

In these past years, comparisons between the United States and the Weimar Republic have become commonplace in political analysis. As democratic institutions crumble, even literal Nazi salutes have reentered the public square. Shock and disbelief have given way to eerie feelings of familiarity, throwbacks to histories against which I had been raised to insist, *Never again.*

We've been here before. You won't like what happens next.

For some time, many of us hoped that this wasn't that, that we'd avoided the worst, that our democracy was still going strong. After all, that occasionally platforms or personalities might get elected (and unelected again) whom some of us find objectionable is, in fact, the sign of a healthy democracy.

But that hope grew thin. Polarization continued to increase to the point of people living in entirely different realities. Democratic elections were not conceded when they produced the "wrong"—and therefore unacceptable—results. Standoffs between different branches of government replaced checks and balances. A complete overhaul of the government and the legal, economic, and social order was readied, so that a candidate could hit the ground running who had openly declared that he would rule as "dictator on day one."

He has since made good on this, as well as many other of his scarier campaign promises, ushering in a politics of "shock and awe."

We can quibble about terms and definitions. Is what we're witnessing a rise of *authoritarianism*—where a strong leadership wields ever greater power with few institutional checks and little accountability to the public, while individuals can enjoy freedom and private life as long as they don't challenge the rulers? Is it emerging *totalitarianism*—where the state seeks to control every aspect of life, facilitated by propaganda, surveillance, and personality cult? Is it more aptly called *oligarchy*, *kleptocracy*, *plutocracy*, or *kakistocracy*, as the few, the wealthy, the selfish govern while degrading public decorum, political culture, and communal flourishing? When does it become justifiable to use the term *fascism*—which adds ideologies of national supremacy and militarism to the mix, as it directs violence both inward and outward to purify and expand the nation?

We can quibble about the merit of any individual policy implemented since. That is not my point. My point is the change of order from a functioning constitutional democracy to . . . *something else*.

I am not arguing that history is repeating itself. Every context is different, and we do well to attend to the complexity of our world today. But noting certain similarities directs us to models we could learn from. Those who had to navigate the breakdown of a democratic order and the rise of a fascist regime in another time and place might have some wisdom to offer us today.

As I studied the Confessing Church, the part of the German churches in the Third Reich who resisted Hitler's "alignment" politics, I have often asked myself: When has the moment come to stand up and publicly and prophetically declare what faith in Jesus Christ means and commands today? It might be that this moment is here. What should the church's response be?

At the same time, I have also increasingly come to appreciate the less dramatic and more mundane, less corporate and more individual, less exceptional and simply ongoing task of faithful living as the world around is rapidly transforming: the task of *doing* all our life and work *as confession*—as a response to God that, even so, responds with a different kind of resolve to the world around us.

This second task is just as important as the first. Maybe even more: After all, only some of us have the necessary time and platform to proclaim *the* faith of *the* church, or even the bandwidth to write the kind of forceful manifestos that might—now, or in some future—become *something like* a confession of the church.

But all of us must keep living despite what feels like the end of a world. And this task requires just as much discernment, just as much attention, and just as much resourcing.

This, then, is the task this little book sets for itself. It is meant for regular people who—regardless of our position on this or that policy that a current government may be advancing, and regardless of our vocation and standing in life—feel uneasy about the rising authoritarian tendencies.

People who are looking for some insight as to how to live as Christians in such a time as this. The lessons are particularly for those among us who are not necessarily looking to die a hero, but who are concerned about how to keep on living as followers of Christ.

"For everything there is a season," knows the Teacher,

> a time to break down and a time to build up;
> a time to weep and a time to laugh;
> a time to mourn and a time to dance;
> a time to throw stones away and a time to gather
> stones together.
>
> (Eccles. 3:1, 3–5)

What is needed first is discernment and orientation.
What times are these?
What are they calling for?
What tasks do they put before us?
Where should we look for wisdom?

PART 1

"PREPARE YOURSELF," OR GATHERING

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PART 1

"PREPARE YOURSELF," OR GATHERING

1

"He Then Rebuked the Wind . . . ," *or* Find Calm

Many things will happen at once. It will feel like a storm: an onslaught of terrifying developments, an interminable bombardment with threats from all sides, a nauseating cascade of news.

Mark tells the story of Jesus in the storm: "A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion, and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' And waking up, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Be silent! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm" (4:37–39).

It is not easy to stay calm in the storm. But it is necessary. Physical flooding will sweep you away as you're frantically trying to keep your head above water or cling to something. Emotional flooding will immobilize you in the face of what overwhelms. Both responses are understandable, but they work against you.

What practices can help with this?
Where do you find joy? Pomegranate, grandchildren

Don't let the storm control your emotions.

Don't let the storm direct your response.

This storm is not a natural catastrophe. It is an intentional strategy. It is meant to shock and awe, to overwhelm and debilitate, to create panic and scatter energy. The projection of unstoppable power will be self-fulfilling if you let it.

Don't let it.

Worship and obedience are not the only ways to empower evil. Evil draws power from attention. Evil draws power from fear.

Don't give it more power.

Lot's wife's turning around to behold the devastation was enough to permanently immobilize her. Don't ignore or sugarcoat what is happening. But don't let it mesmerize you. Don't let it take your eyes off the road.

In his prison camp, Dietrich Bonhoeffer mused:

> I often notice hereabouts how few people there are who can harbor many different things at the same time. When bombers come, they are nothing but fear itself; when there is something good to eat, nothing but greed itself; when they fail to get what they want, they become desperate; if something succeeds, that's all they'll see. . . . Everything, whether objective or subjective, disintegrates into fragments. Christianity, on the other hand, puts us into many different dimensions of life at the same time. . . . We weep with those who weep at the same time as we rejoice with those who rejoice. We fear—(I've just been interrupted again by the siren, so I'm sitting outdoors enjoying the sun)—for our lives, but at the same time we must think thoughts that are more important to us than our lives.[1]

The storm is not an illusion; its dangers are real. Even so, it is also a distraction. No one can pay attention to all the things all the time. The highest waves raise your alarms—and may hide more inconspicuous but forceful blows. The waves may or may not crush you, but focusing on them will keep you from attending to what matters most to you. Karl Barth advises, "a short, sharp glance suffices."[2]

Don't let the storm steal your focus.

No one can live in a constant state of emergency. Energy and attention are limited goods. When the absurd and atrocious become the everyday, two things happen: First, people desensitize. We run out of outrage. What would have created a panic yesterday elicits only a frown today.

Second, the craving for normalcy is so strong that people will tolerate, even demand, exceptional measures. Unbridled decision making without regard for process or legal constraints will feel like a relief rather than a threat.

Not strong enough to govern by majority and process, Hitler ruled by emergency decrees, which he gave out in rapid succession. An arson attack on the German parliament in January 1933 became his ticket to remove all checks on his powers: Dealing with the emergency demanded emergency powers. Within eighteen months, Hitler had abolished all

remaining democratic institutions, "aligned" all organizations of civil life, withdrawn from the League of Nations, created the gestapo, and started purging the civil service of Jewish employees. Finally, he took out by assassination all remaining opposition in the ranks of his own party in the so-called Night of the Long Knives in June 1934.

Creating a state of emergency is a political strategy to gain unrestrained power. Don't fall for it.

At the height of the tumultuous integration of the German regional churches into a centralized *Reichskirche*, Karl Barth wrote a landmark essay titled "Theological Existence Today." Today, he asserted, the task was "to do theology, and nothing but theology, as if nothing had happened."[3] This demand raised eyebrows, then as much as now. Surely indifference is not the right response to the dismantling of civic life and democratic institutions?

But Barth neither advocated for indifference nor did he practice it. He played an important role in the Confessing Church, which declared the Hitler-devout German Christians a heresy and created their own parallel structures in resistance to Nazi co-optation. Barth lost his position, was prohibited from publishing and public speaking, and was forced to leave the country. From Switzerland, he would soon urge other nations that fighting against Hitler meant to fight "for the church of Jesus Christ."[4] Aged fifty-four, he even volunteered to serve in the Swiss reserve forces. And the essay itself did not advocate for indifference but engaged with different factions in his church, finding all of them theologically lacking in their resistance to the forced integration.

But Barth understood something that might be worth remembering today: Totalitarianism is about total control. It wants to control not just the public but also the private spaces. Not just politics and economics and education and religion, but also your thoughts and feelings. It does not need your love; your fear is enough.

Keeping your focus, feelings, and thoughts your own is hard. But it is itself an act of resistance.

Be strategic with your attention.

Knowing that a storm is brewing will allow you to be prepared. Losing sight of the horizon under crashing waves won't. Checking your social media feed every hour will not help you. Having spaces and times free from it will.

Follow the news, but limit your exposure. Ask yourself: Am I gaining important information, or am I giving away my attention? Am I focusing on what matters, or am I just getting dizzy?

Keeping some areas of life from the all-extending grasp is hard. But it generates spaces where other thoughts can be thought, other feelings can be felt, other priorities can reign than those dictated by emergencies real or staged.

If there is to be a life beyond totalitarianism, we must cultivate a life outside its grasp, even as we live within it.