Hebrews 11 is a divine mandate to listen to people’s stories.

It is a passage of Scripture that references story after story of faith; one person after another – Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and on and on it goes.

The unmistakable implication of this chapter is that if we hear about the faith of others, and seek to imitate them, we are enabled to “lay aside every weight and run with endurance the race that is set before us.” {Hebrews 12:1}

Their example helps us to run our race.

God has always used human agents and their stories to stir and encourage his people.

Reflection on the stories of the faithful is one of the major ways through which we are able learn the wisdom of God’s ways.

Listening to the stories of people from another time safeguards us from what C. S. Lewis called ‘Chronological snobbery;’ the foolishness of thinking that our age and time is the sum of wisdom.

Being a student of people’s stories is an exercise in theology.

Theology which is, at its simplest, seeking to know God, emerges from these real lives devoted to His cause.

Being a student of people’s stories is an exercise in psychology.

It deepens our understanding of human nature, including, hopefully, our own.

Being a student of people’s stories is an exercise in prophecy.
Prophetic vision involves not just foresight {future} or insight {present} but also hindsight {past}.

Thus far in our series we have considered –

- **G. K. Chesterton** – a lesson in warmth, wit and whimsy.
- **C. S. Lewis** – a baptized intellect and imagination.

This morning I want to look at the life of **Dietrich Bonhoeffer – a man of courage**.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born on February 4, 1906 with his twin sister Sabine to a prominent aristocratic family in Breslau, Germany, the sixth of eight children.

His father, **Karl Bonhoeffer**, was one of the most distinguished neurologists in Germany as a professor of neurology and psychiatry at the University of Berlin and the director of the psychiatric clinic at Charite Hospital in Berlin.

His mother, **Paula von Hase**, was the granddaughter of Karl von Hase, the distinguished church historian and preacher to the court of Kaiser Wilhelm II.

The Bonhoeffer family was not notably devout, so when a lad of 14, Dietrich surprised his family by declaring he wanted nothing more than to be a minister-theologian in the church.

That announcement provoked mild consternation among his brothers. One of whom was destined to be a physicist, and another a lawyer. Service in the church seemed a petty waste of the boy’s obvious talents.
His father felt the same way but kept silent, preferring to allow his son freedom to make his own mistakes.

When his family criticized the church as self-serving and cowardly, a flash of Dietrich’s steely determination came out: “In that case, I’ll reform it!”

Bonhoeffer was an exceptional pianist, and his parents thought he might pursue a music career. He was also athletic and played such games as tennis and chess with great skill and enthusiasm.

He entered University and earned his doctorate in theology at the tender age of 21 with his doctoral thesis being hailed, by no less than Karl Barth the famous Swiss Theologian, as a “Theological Miracle.”

Not yet at the minimum age for ordination, and in need of practical experience, Bonhoeffer interrupted his academic career. He accepted an appointment as assistant pastor in Spain, in a Barcelona parish that tended to the spiritual needs of the German business community.

His months in Spain (1928-29) coincided with the initial shock waves of the Great Depression. Hence, parish life in Barcelona gave Bonhoeffer his first grim encounter with poverty.

He helped organize a program in his parish to minister to the unemployed. In desperation, he even begged money from his family to help those in need.

In a memorable sermon he reminded his people that “God wanders among us in human form, speaking to us in those who cross our paths, be they stranger, beggar, sick, or even in those nearest to
us in everyday life, becoming Christ’s demand on our faith in him.”

He came back to Germany in 1929 and turned his attention to his second dissertation which was required to obtain an appointment to the university faculty.

Having secured his appointment to the university faculty, Bonhoeffer now decided to accept a Sloane Fellowship. This offered him an additional year of studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

American seminary was not up to his exacting German standards; “There is no theology here,” he commented somewhat caustically.

The main benefit of the year seemed to come in the form of the life-changing experiences and friendships.

Through a black student from Alabama, Reverend Frank Fisher, Bonhoeffer experienced firsthand the oppressive racism endured by the black community of Harlem.

He loved the passion of Black Church services and fell in love with black spiritual music.

During this time Bonhoeffer began to see things “from below” – from the perspective of those who suffer oppression.

He observed,

“Here one can truly speak and hear about sin and grace and the love of God … the Black Christ is preached with rapturous passion and vision.”
People noticed the changes in Bonhoeffer’s outlook on his return to the University of Berlin.

His students described him as unlike his stuffier, more aloof colleagues.

Trying to explain what had happened to him; Bonhoeffer said simply that he “had become a Christian.”

As he put it, he was for the first time in his life, “on the right track,” adding, “I know that inwardly I shall be really clear and honest only when I have begun to take seriously the Sermon on the Mount.”

Bonhoeffer owed a huge debt to the Swiss Theologian, Karl Barth.

Barth’s writings had electrified the theological world and had captivated Bonhoeffer during his student days in Berlin.

It turned Bonhoeffer away from the Liberalism and Existentialism that gripped much of the church of Europe to a Biblical and Evangelical faith. The two ultimately became firm friends.

Bonhoeffer’s promising academic and ecclesiastical career was dramatically altered with Nazi ascension to power on January 30, 1933.

He was a determined opponent of the regime from its first days.

Two days after Hitler was installed as Chancellor, as Bonhoeffer delivered a radio address in which he attacked Hitler and warned Germany against slipping into an idolatrous cult of the Fuhrer (leader), who could very well turn out to be Verfuhrer (mis-leader, or seducer), he was cut off the air in the middle of a sentence.
One sometimes hears that Hitler was a Christian. He was certainly not, but neither was he openly anti-Christian as most of his top lieutenants were.

What helped him aggrandize power, he approved of, and what prevented it, he did not. He was utterly pragmatic. In public he often made comments that made him sound pro-church or pro-Christian, but there can be no question that he said these things cynically for political gain.

In private, he possessed an unblemished record of statements against Christianity and Christians.

On one occasion he commented,

“It’s been our misfortune to have the wrong religion. Why didn’t we have the religion of the Japanese, who regard sacrifice for the Fatherland as the highest good? The Mohammedan religion too would have been much more compatible to us than Christianity. Why did it have to be Christianity with its meekness and flabbiness?”

His Lieutenants were much more open in their hatred of Christianity.

Himmler was the head of the SS and was aggressively anti-Christian. Very early on, he barred clergy from serving in the SS.

In 1935 he ordered every SS member to resign leadership in religious organizations. The next year he forbade SS musicians to participate in religious services, even out of uniform. Soon afterward he forbade SS members to attend church services.
For Himmler, the SS was itself a religion, and its members, postulants in its priesthood.

Many SS rituals were occultic in nature. Himmler was deeply involved in the occult and in astrology, and much of what the SS perpetrated in the death camps bore Himmler’s demonic stamp.

Reinhardt Heydrich, another of Hitler’s lieutenants, commented,

“You'll see the day, ten years from now, when Adolf Hitler will occupy precisely the same position in Germany that Jesus Christ has now.”

The German Church in general was completely seduced by Hitler and National Socialism.

**Hermann Gruner**, a German church leader summed up their thinking in saying,

“National Socialism is positive Christianity in action .... Hitler is the way of the Spirit and the will of God for the German people to enter the Church of Christ.”

Bonhoeffer, who was now an ordained minister in the Lutheran Church, tried to persuade the German Church to oppose the Nazi’s and to persuade the synods not to vote for pro-Hitler candidates.

Despite Bonheoffer’s efforts, the German Christians elected as National Bishop a Nazi sympathizer, Ludwig Muller.

Bonhoeffer saw the issue starkly and prophetically declared,

“The conflict is really ‘Germanism’ or Christianity.”
Soon after the church adopted Hitler’s “Aryan Clause,” which denied the pulpit to ordained ministers of Jewish blood.

Bonhoeffer was an outspoken opponent of the regime.

In April 1933 he talked to a group of pastors on “The Church and the Jewish Question.”

In his address, he urged the churches to **first**, boldly challenge the government to justify such blatantly immoral laws.

**Second**, he demanded that the church come to the aid of victims, baptized or not.

**Finally**, he declared that the church should “jam the spokes of the wheels” of state should the persecution of Jews continue.

Many of the gathered clergy left in a huff, convinced they had heard sedition.

The Protestant Church split into two – those supporting the National Socialists, called ‘German Christians,’ and, what became known as ‘The Confessing Church;’ those who opposed Hitler and the Nazi’s.

Bonhoeffer was considered a leader in the Confessing Church and along with Martin Niemoller and Karl Barth, did all he could to rally support against the Nazi’s.

They {mostly Barth’s work} drafted the now famous ‘Barmen Confession of faith’ in which they associated ‘Hitlerism’ with idolatry.

As you can imagine, it made many of the signers marked men with the Gestapo.
Disheartened by the German Churches’ complacency with the Nazi regime, the 27-year-old Bonhoeffer accepted in the autumn of 1933 a two-year appointment as a pastor of two German-speaking Protestant churches in London: St. Paul’s and Sydenham.

He explained to Barth that he had found little support for his views – even among friends – and that “it was about time to go for a while into the desert.”

Barth regarded this as running away from real battle. He sharply rebuked Bonhoeffer, saying,

“I can only reply to all the reasons and excuses which you put forward: ‘And what of the German Church?’”

Barth accused Bonhoeffer of abandoning his post and wasting his “splendid theological armory” while “the house of your church is on fire” and chided him to return to Berlin “by the next ship.”

Yet Bonhoeffer was not abandoning the fight against Nazism.

From London, he intended to bring outside pressure on the German Reich Church.

Bonhoeffer rallied people to oppose the German Christian movement and its attempt to amalgamate Nazi racism with the Christian gospel.

When Bishop Theodor Heckel – the official in charge of German Evangelical Church foreign affairs – traveled to London to warn Bonhoeffer to abstain from any ecumenical activity not directly authorized by Berlin, Bonhoeffer refused to abstain.
In 1935 Bonhoeffer returned to Germany when asked by the leaders of the Confessing Church to direct an illegal seminary near the Baltic Sea.

For the Confessing Church, establishing its own seminaries was a bold move.

They would simply bypass the typical training of candidates at universities tainted by Nazism. With their own seminaries, they could ignore the requirements that candidates prove their pure Aryan blood and loyalty to Nazism as conditions for ordination.

It was here while teaching at this seminary in Finkenwalde that Bonhoeffer wrote his now famous books, “The Cost of Discipleship,” and “Life Together.”

The Gestapo closed the seminary in October 1937. Bonhoeffer then tried to conduct a secret “seminary on the run,” moving from village to village meeting and training Confessing Church pastors.

This ultimately proved unsuccessful.

Over this period of sustained pressure from the Gestapo, even the Confessing Church Pastors began to waver and many sought legitimacy from the government in return for peace and security.

Bonhoeffer continued his outspoken opposition and made the issue of Hitler’s treatment of the Jews the ‘acid test’ of the church’s faithfulness to the Gospel.

“Where is Abel your brother?” he would ask.
He would frequently quote Proverbs 31:8, “Who will speak up for those who are voiceless?” to explain why he had to be the voice defending the Jews in Nazi Germany.

On the now infamous, “Crystal Night” of November 9, 1938, the full frenzy of Nazi anti-Semitism was unleashed on Jewish citizens.

The police watched passively as German hordes broke windows of houses and stores, burned synagogues, and brutalized Jews.

Bonhoeffer was away from Berlin on that night, but he quickly raced to the scene. He discredited attempts to attribute this violence to God’s so-called curse of the Jews because of the death of Christ.

Bonhoeffer felt keen disappointment over the church’s dishonorable silence following that mayhem.

This was one of the factors that led him to contemplate a second trip to America.

He embarked for the United States on June 2, 1939 at the invitation of the Union Theological Seminary in New York.

It was the intention of his American friends that Bonhoeffer stay in the US and be free from the persecution of the Nazi’s.

Amid much inner turmoil, he soon regretted his decision despite strong pressures from his friends to stay in the U.S.

He wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr:

“I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in
Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.”

Back in Germany, Bonhoeffer was further harassed by the Nazi authorities. He was forbidden to speak in public and was required to regularly report his activities to the police in 1940. In 1941, he was forbidden to print or to publish.

In the meantime, Bonhoeffer – an avowed pacifist and pastor – appeared to do a complete turnaround and joined the Abwehr (Aber-with) (a German military intelligence organization.)

What was not widely known was that it was also the center of the anti-Hitler resistance.

He was effectively functioning as a double agent – His ostensible mission was to scout intelligence information through his “pastoral visits” and ecumenical contacts.

Under this cover, however, Bonhoeffer was involved in secret courier activities.

His principal mission was to seek terms of surrender from the Allies, should an ‘Abwehr proposed plot’ against Hitler succeed.

While working for the Abwehr, Bonhoeffer also became involved in “Operation 7,” a daring plan to smuggle Jews out of Germany.

This attracted the Gestapo’s suspicions.

On April 5, 1943, after the Abwehr had led two failed attempts on Hitler’s life, Bonhoeffer was arrested and incarcerated at Tegel Military Prison in Berlin.
At first the Nazis had only vague charges against him: his evading of the military draft, his role in “Operation 7,” and his prior disloyalties.

On July 20, 1944, an “officers’ plot” to assassinate Hitler also failed. {Remember the 2008 Tom Cruise movie ‘Valkyrie?’}

In the dragnet that ensued, the Gestapo’s investigations closed in on the main conspirators, and Bonhoeffer was implicated in some of the documents they found. He was transferred to the Gestapo prison in Berlin in October 1944.

While in prison, Bonhoeffer wrote inspiring letters and poems that are now regarded as Christian classics. After the posthumous publication of these Letters and Papers from Prison (by Eberhard Bethge), people around the globe began to appreciate Bonheoffer’s creative, relentless probing into the meaning of Christian faith.

Most of these letters were written to his friend Bethge or to his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer.

He had fallen in love with Maria in 1942, during stays with her family between his Abwehr journeys.

He had been charmed by her beauty, personal verve, and spirit of independence.

Her family initially objected to their engagement because of her youth -- she was 18, and he was 37.

He was also involved in secret actions that could prove dangerous to her.

But after his imprisonment, they publicly announced their betrothal as a display of support for him.
Maria’s visits became Bonhoeffer’s main sustenance during the grim early days of his imprisonment.

In February 1945, Dietrich was shifted to the concentration camp at Buchenwald.

What we know of those last days is leaned from the book ‘The Venlo Incident,’ written by a fellow prisoner, British intelligence officer Payne Best.

Bonhoeffer and Best were among the “important prisoners” taken to Buchenwald.

Best later wrote of Bonhoeffer:

“He was one of the very few men I have ever met to whom his God was real and ever close to him ....”

In prison he won the hearts of fellow prisoners and even his Nazi guards.

The guards, at great personal risk, often smuggled letters in and out for Bonhoeffer.

They recognized the courage, goodness and integrity of the man and wrote of him to family members, even managing to get pictures taken with him.

On April 3, Bonhoeffer and others were loaded into a prison van and taken to the extermination camp at Flossenburg.

The prisoners were herded into a small schoolhouse being used as a temporary lockup.
It was Low Sunday [the first Sunday after Easter], and several prisoners prevailed on Bonhoeffer to lead them in a prayer service.

He did so, offering a meditation on Isaiah’s words, “With his wounds we are healed.”

In his book Best recalled that moment:

“He reached the hearts of all, finding just the right words to express the spirit of our imprisonment, and the thoughts and resolutions which it had bought.”

Their quiet was interrupted as the door was pushed open by two men in civilian clothes, members of the Gestapo. They demanded that Bonhoeffer follow them. For the prisoners, this had come to mean only one thing: he was about to be executed.

Bonhoeffer took the time to bid everyone farewell. Drawing Best aside, he spoke his final recorded words, a message to his English friend, Bishop Bell:

“This is the end-for me, the beginning of life.”

Early the next morning, April 9, Bonhoeffer, and four fellow conspirators were hanged at the extermination camp of Flossenbug.

The camp doctor, who had to witness the executions, remarked that he watched Bonhoeffer kneel and pray before being led to the gallows.

“I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer.”
“At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.”

In the distance boomed the cannons, of Patton’s army. Three weeks later Hitler would commit suicide, and on May 7, the war in Europe would be over.

What can we learn from Bonhoeffer?

What is his legacy?

I can’t do the man justice in a couple of points.

But let me note a couple of things.

I can’t think of Bonhoeffer without the word ‘courage’ springing immediately to mind.

He discerned, and immediately spoke to the threat that he saw rising in National Socialism.

That took incredible bravery, ultimately costing him his life.

Many other German Pastors either were seduced by the Nazis or were bullied and cowered into silence.

After the war was over Martin Niemoller famously commented,

“In Germany the Nazi’s came first for the communists and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a communist. Then they came for the Jews and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew. Then they came for the Trade Unionists and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the
Catholics and I didn’t speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me and by that time there was no one left to speak up.”

Bonhoeffer spoke up at the very start.

He was willing to be a prophetic voice to his nation, immediately putting himself out of step with its rising German nationalism.

There were Pastors at the time who claimed the church should submit to the authorities and be guided by them in how they functioned, appealing to Scriptures like

**Romans 13:1-2.**

“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resists the power, resists the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.”

For Bonhoeffer such a position was an intolerable twisting of the Scriptures.

His position was that submission was never to mean an uncritical, unconditional, blind obedience and acceptance.

In fact, in certain conditions it will not include obedience at all, but rather a conscientious disobedience.

**E. Stanley Jones** summed up Bonheoffer’s position when he commented,

“I love my country and will give to it everything excepting one thing; my conscience. That belongs to the Kingdom of God and
when they clash my conscience will bow only to the Kingdom of God.”

Bonhoeffer knew that ‘rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s’ doesn’t mean giving to Caesar all the things he asks for.

The arbiter of what belongs to Caesar is not Caesar but God.

Bonhoeffer reminds me that the true Church of Christ will always, to one degree or another, be out of step with the society it is placed in.

We will, like our Master, be culturally offensive to the ruling elite.

In the Communist States of the 1970’s -1980’s the Church was slated and persecuted as a Liberal force.

It stood against the idolization of the State. It worked for freedom and was therefore seen as liberal. The church was on the left hand end of the political spectrum.

In the West the Church is accused of being a Conservative force.

It stands against the idolization of individual fulfillment and sexual freedom.

The church is associated with causes on the right of the political spectrum.

But the Church is neither left nor right if it is functioning correctly. It speaks not from the left or right of the political spectrum, but for God from above.

Bonhoeffer understood that and was prepared to pay the price most prophetic voices end up paying.
I think any time the church find its self comfortably in step with the prevailing, governing elite we must be careful to ask some probing questions regarding our prophetic clarity.

Another thing that struck me while I was studying Bonhoeffer’s life was **how young he was** to have such incredible and lasting impact.

He was 39 when he died. {The same age by the way, as another famous Christian, Blaise Pascal, who also had tremendous and lasting impact.}

How did such young men think so clearly and write so powerfully?

I mused as to whether that could or would that happen today?

Does our society expect, produce or encourage that kind of maturity in younger people?

I was watching TV the other night and during the break in the programme I was watching an advertisement featuring Jane Fonda came on.

Fonda is pushing mid 70’s. Here she was doing her level best to imitate a 30 year old.

For a 73 year old she was doing an ok imitation I guess, but it made me think about how our culture deifies youth and youthfulness, usually at the expense of maturity.

We seem to have determined to be a ‘Peter Pan’ society and attempt never to grow up.

For the most part, with some Fonda-like exceptions, we haven’t reversed the aging process but what we have been spectacularly
successful at is maintaining our emotional and intellectual immaturity.

How often we observe 40-50 year olds trying pathetically to be teenagers or least 20 something’s.

The only thing they are succeeding at is being emotional and intellectual dwarfs.

I suspect our cultural climate would almost be incapable of producing a Bonhoeffer or a Pascal.

They don’t happen by accident.

They come out of a cultural milieu that expects and anticipates that young people aspire to wisdom and are prepared to put in the ‘hard yards’ early in life to achieve it.

We have created a culture where accepting adult responsibility and embracing adult maturity is postponed as long as possible, if not indefinitely.

We are consumed with the pursuit of the pleasure principle; the next adrenaline rush; the next high; the next gig, the next party. We are addicted to amusement.

The word ‘amusement’ comes to us from the Greek language. It is a combination of the word ‘muse,’ = ‘to think,’ and the prefix ‘a,’ which is a negation; ‘not to.’

‘Not to think;’ it’s not surprising that in a culture such as ours, Bonhoeffer’s and Pascal’s are rare ‘species,’ bordering on extinction.

We are a culture of committed hedonists.
Hedonism and emotional and intellectual maturity aren’t usually seen in the same company.

I think the church must be a counter cultural community.

The Church can produce Bonheoffer’s and Pascal’s, but in order to do it we must be a people committed to growing up rather than simply growing old.

Young people, you must not think serious thinking can be postponed until you are 40 or 50.

If you postpone it until then you will be incapable of it when that time arrives.

Ask God for a Spirit of wisdom and knowledge and give Him something to work with.

Last week a young lady of about 10 years of age came up to me before the service. She had in hand C. S. Lewis’ biography, “Surprised by Joy,” which she was presently reading. I have to say I was most impressed.

I went home thinking that maybe there’s hope for the next generation of the church, even if mine has largely abdicated its responsibilities!

Lastly, if you have heard of Bonhoeffer before today then the thing that you have probably had his name associated was an idea he wrote about in his book, ‘Costly Discipleship;’ it is the concept of ‘cheap grace.’

Bonhoeffer lamented that in his time the church was dishing out a version of grace that he termed, ‘cheap grace.’
He commented that it was grace without subsequent discipleship; without any obedience.

“We conferred it on ourselves,” he said, “and it cost us nothing.”

It resulted in the ‘justification of sin but not the sinner.’

True grace he claimed was costly for it called us to follow.

It was free but not cheap.

It condemns sin but justifies the sinner.

You may have heard of his famous line,

“When Jesus bids a man to follow, he bids him to come and die.”

I suspect his comments on ‘cheap grace’ are such that every culture must heed and insure that the Gospel we present is the true Gospel and not some self-serving substitution; where I can have Christ and not have my life altered or transformed; I can have Christ and maintain my excessively materialistic lifestyle unaffected; I can have Christ and keep sexually promiscuous lifestyle or my greed or my hatred or my pride.

Bonhoeffer is as uncomfortable and as much of a challenge to today’s culture as he was to Hitler’s Germany.

He was, and remains, a courageous prophetic voice to all.