

Sermon

March 13, 2022

Scriptures: Genesis 15:1-12,17-18, Psalm 27, Philippians 3:17-4:1, Luke 13:31-35

About a month ago I stood here and preached on forgiveness. In the Orthodox Church which celebrates Easter on a different calendar than ours, last Sunday was forgiveness Sunday, a day of preparation for Lent. That weekend, a beloved 61 year old Ukrainian poet, essayist, novelist and former Fulbright Scholar, Irvanets Oleksandr, composed a few lines that encapsulated the national mood. "I shout out to the whole world," he wrote in a short poem published online by his fans, who have since lost touch with the writer and were worried that he may have fallen behind Russian lines. "I won't forgive anyone!" "I will never forgive Russia," the poet wrote.

Truth be told, for many of us, the events of the world in the past two weeks have landed like a Tsunami upon the season of forgiveness and reconciliation that is Lent burying it, engulfing and threatening our trust in God. This unprovoked war violates internationally agreed upon human rights. Children have been killed in their homes and on the streets, hospitals including a maternity and children's hospital have been bombed or destroyed. Families have died in their homes and fleeing on the streets.

For me, Lent has become a time to seek God anew in the midst of this tragedy, terror and sadness, to heed the words of the psalmist. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

By grace, today's Gospel jumps suddenly from the Baptism of Jesus and his Temptation in the wilderness to Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and the cross that awaits him. On the way Jesus preaches in synagogues, teaches with parables, and heals the sick. Now some Pharisees come to Jesus and say, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." And Jesus, suddenly, faces yet a new temptation. Will he flee for safety? Will he abandon his mission? The fox is at the door of the hen house, and Jesus is the hen. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

And what does Jesus say? "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.'" Jesus will not flee. He knows what lies ahead but he won't be distracted from the work to which he is called. Politics will not prevail over God's compassion for God's people. And then, in a surprising rebuke, Jesus laments, "And you were not willing!" In Jesus' eyes, the children of Jerusalem are not willing to gather at God's table, to seek God's protection, not willing to gather around a Savior who casts out demons and performs cures and speaks truth to powers like Herod. Today Jesus asks us, will you and me and all who are threatened by the foxes of this world gather around Jesus for protection? Invite others to join us?

There are many reasons why people find it difficult, even impossible to seek Jesus in hard times, or to accept God's grace. Look at Abram in today's lesson. God comes to Abram "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield." But Abram doesn't believe it. He is old and Sarai is barren, beyond child-bearing age, so Abram says, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue

childless... You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” No, says, God. Your descendants will be as numerous as the stars in heaven. Then God grace grows even more. “I am the Lord who brought you from Ur... to give you this land to possess.” Again, Abram is unsure about this too. After all, he’s been wandering around a long time following God’s call but he remains homeless. “O Lord, God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” And God gives him a sign in a dream, and affirms his covenant with him and all his descendants.

The psalmist too laments what he’s experiencing. After opening his prayer with his prayer with “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” Reality breaks in, the woes of the world are crashing over the poet: enemies, adversaries and “false witnesses breathing out violence.” God is nowhere to be seen. “Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!” “Do not hide your face from me.” Both Abram and the psalmist know how tough life can be, that bad things happen to good people. Jesus knows this too. On the cross he knew our sorrow, our fear, our broken dream. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Jesus, Abram and the psalmist suffer. Yet in their times of trouble they turn their faces to God. Jesus prays. Abram prays. Hear the psalmist’s lament to God: “Hear my voice. Be merciful. Answer me. Do not hide your face from me. Do not reject or forsake me. Teach me. Lead me. Do not turn me over to my foes.” The poet is a courageous man who begins his prayer with praise then spills out all the troubles in his heart. This is good, honest prayer, the kind of prayer that Jesus the hen wishes to hear from the people of Jerusalem. Prayer that tells it like it is. Prayer that begins and ends with eyes on the Lord our God. In fact, the psalmist uses the word YHWH 13 times in this psalm.

In the middle of Psalm 27 is this beautiful verse: “One thing I asked of the Lord, that I will seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple. For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.” That verse is a good guide for children of God to observe Lenten spiritual disciplines.

What does it mean to you “to live in the house of the Lord all the days of your life?” Or in St. Paul’s words, to live as if “our citizenship is in heaven.” Every day Jesus longs for us to huddle under his protective wings. Yet so much of daily living distracts and discourages us from turning to God in prayer, or speaking to others about our experience of God. Contemporary theologian Dorothy Butler Bass tells a story about a mother as she tucks her children into bed each night ... she asks them a question: “Where did you meet God today?” And they tell her, one by one: a teacher helped me, there was a homeless person in the park, I saw a tree with lots of flowers in it. She tells them where she met God, too. Before the children drop off to sleep, the stuff of this day has become the substance of their prayer. What does living “in the house of God all the days of your life” look like?

Second, the psalmist desires “to behold the beauty of the Lord.” A friend invited me to race on the Bay last weekend on his 30’ boat. I went but felt guilty about sailing across that beautiful body of water facing the San Francisco shoreline and the Golden Gate, laughing with friends,

knowing what a privileged life I have, when there is so much pain to grieve. I didn't know how much I needed that time with beauty to rest, until I felt the grace of God's presence with the wind blowing across my face and lifting our sail. That day, the Holy Spirit was all I needed to recover hope, hope that "freedom and dignity are not mere words" for the men, women and children enduring the violence of war or, here at home, facing other foxes in their lives.

Lastly, the psalmist desires "to seek God in his temple." The church is a place not only for prayer but for learning, for asking hard questions, for honest dialogue about God and us. God calls us to "preserve the capacity to do good, to contemplate beauty, and to seek truth," in the words of the chief Ukrainian military chaplain, Andry Zelinsky, It is to be the body of Christ. It is asking: what is God calling me, calling us, to be and to do at this time? How can I, how can we the church, be the wings of Jesus to the suffering? How can we the church be about Jesus' work of casting out demons and performing cures, of healing and reconciliation?

This second week of Lent, I invite you to pray Psalm 27 in a quiet place. Sit down with paper and pen and listen for Jesus.

I read this week the story is of a young civilian couple, Lesya and Valeriy, who volunteered in the Ukrainian defense. Now on a small patch of grass off a busy road next to a checkpoint in Kiev, an Orthodox priest and military chaplain presided over their wedding with vestments and a cross draped over his military uniform. The couple were dressed in camouflage; the bride wore a simple veil over her carefully curled hair. The mayor and friends surrounded them. To a reporter the chaplain later said, "As a chaplain I cannot use any weapons so I am left with my words and prayers. My weapons are different, like liturgies, prayers, or even wedding ceremonies like this one."

As Christians across the sea from Ukraine, these "weapons," if you will, are ours too—the wings of Jesus to share with others—liturgies like Baptism and Eucharist that unite us with Christ and the world, words of dialogue and compassion, prayers to God, and like Jesus, speaking truth to power—the truth of God's love for all people, God's call to repentance for the forgiveness of sins, the truth that God is love and justice and peace.

Today the couple Filimonovs and others face a fox and tell him they are too busy to flee. They need to protect their nation from the enemy, and heal their broken land. The foxes of this world demand we flee. Soldiers, chaplains and a newly married couples in Ukraine will not. They use whatever weapons they have been called to use. Neither should you or I flee, but look to Jesus, our mother hen, who will never flee foxes of the world. For us, he went to the cross to conquer sin and death. Whatever terror you or I may face today—Pray we heed the last words of the psalmist to us: "O tarry and await the Lord's pleasure; be strong, and he shall comfort your heart; wait patiently fo the Lord!"