

A sermon preached on March 13th, 2022 based upon Luke 13:31-35 entitled, "Understanding Putin's Invasion of Ukraine through the Lens of the Gospel"

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you."

He said to them, "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.

Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'

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!

See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'" (Luke 13:31-35)

Many of us have been feeling greatly disturbed – perhaps even tempted to despair – by the news coming out of Ukraine regarding the violent invasion taking place there: The brutal killing of innocent people -- men, women and children. Hospitals and schools bombed. Two million refugees fleeing the violence, the cold, the hunger.

I've been trying to think about the tremendous suffering that is going on from the perspective of our Christian faith. The Gospel lesson from this morning's lectionary readings provides a striking entry point for such reflections.

Before I talk about the reading we just heard I want to briefly revisit the Gospel story we heard last week: Before beginning his ministry Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness for the specific purpose of going head to head with the devil – to get clear regarding what is good and what is evil. It required an intensive 40 day focus precisely because it can often be very hard to distinguish between what is good and what is evil.

There are two basic things I would highlight from that story:

First, that from the beginning of human history life has involved an often unrecognized struggle between good and evil.

And second, there was something peculiar that the devil said to Jesus in his second temptation – something we might easily skip over. He tells Jesus that all the kingdoms of the world and their authority belong to him. I would take that to mean at the very least, all political power is tinged with evil – that is, inevitably political authority is abused -- used for self-centered ends. That as soon as a person or a group takes hold

of some measure of political power, they will strive to hold onto that power and if possible, extend that power even when to do so conflicts with what is truly good and just.

Though his ministry impacted the political order, Jesus specifically turned down the path of taking hold of political power.

So, in this morning's story Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem when people come up to tell him that he should turn around – that he should flee because King Herod -- the most powerful political authority in Jerusalem – wants to kill him.

Jesus has no illusions regarding the violence of which Herod is capable. Herod has already killed Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist.

Jesus knows this, but he refuses to be intimidated. He continues on towards Jerusalem, knowing that when he gets there, he will end up nailed to a cross.

Such courage, and such love.

Note also the absence of macho bravado which often gets mistaken for strong leadership. Jesus is the very opposite of the tough guy machismo of Vladimir Putin. Jesus readily acknowledges that his heart is broken by the rejection his offer of love receives. He uses a remarkable image for himself -- a mother hen longing to draw her baby chicks under the shelter of her wings – to express his desire to draw all people into the circle of his great love.

Jesus freely acknowledges his heart ache and expresses something like the despair we feel watching the news from Ukraine.

A couple of chapters later when Jesus draws near to the Holy city he will openly weep, grieving over the unwillingness of Herod and the others holding power in Jerusalem to open their hearts to "the things that make more peace."

Jesus knows how his life will end in Jerusalem – nonetheless he steadfastly refuses to back down. He speaks the truth, clearly naming the presence of evil.

Such extraordinary courage.

Throughout history there have always been political leaders like Herod who fully succumb to the temptations of power. Vladimir Putin is simply the most obvious, present-day example.

Scholars who study international relations with what they consider a detached realism tell us that Putin's invasion of Ukraine wasn't surprising. He has always looked for ways to extend his power and that of Russia. Given the shared history and culture of Ukrainians and Russians, and given how far removed we are from the end of World War II and the motivations that led to the formation of NATO, it was reasonable for Putin to believe he could invade Ukraine and that apathy would prevail – there would be little significant resistance either in Ukraine or from the nations of the world.

For those who study such things, Putin's invasion wasn't surprising, but what has been surprising is the intensity of the resistance with which his evil invasion has been met. Clearly the focal point of this resistance has come from what before would have seemed like an unlikely place and that is President Zelensky of Ukraine. Prior to the invasion, the world didn't think much of Zelensky. He was elected to office in 2019, appearing quite ill equipped for the job, having no real experience in politics or government. He also lacked the bravado that people have come to associate with strong leaders: he made a point in his inaugural address of telling the people of Ukraine that they shouldn't put his picture on their walls – he wasn't an idol to be worshipped. *No*, he told them, *put you kids' pictures there. Look at their faces and be reminded of what truly matters.*

It was struck reading this morning's Gospel lesson that Zelensky's leadership during this terrible tragedy resembles what we see Jesus doing.

Zelensky knows very well that Putin has sent assassins to take his life. He knows that the probability is great that Putin's superior military forces will eventually succeed in taking the capital city of Kyiv. But like Jesus, Zelensky has made it very clear he will not flee to safety. He remains in the city suffering under the same conditions as the people he was elected to serve, willing to sacrifice his life if necessary.

And Zelensky has also loudly and consistently called out the evil expressed in Putin's brutal invasion. He has tapped into what Mahatma Gandhi called "soul force" – a very real form of power that is altogether different from Putin's brutal military power. Zelensky has appealed directly to the moral conscience of the nations of the world, and to a degree not anticipated his cry has been heard.

Goodness comes in many forms, but in this broken world one of its primary expressions is the willingness to sacrifice. The realists who assessed the situation prior to the invasion assumed that in their dependency to Russian oil, Europeans would be unwilling to sacrifice their comfort in order to pressure Putin to bring an end to his invasion, but to a surprising extent they have shown such willingness.

In Poland, a great many people are opening their homes to provide hospitality to the refugees entering their country.

In recent years our country sadly has been characterized by an often petty and destructive divisiveness. We witness certain issues argued passionately by people totally convinced they are on the side of good and that those who disagree with them are on the side of evil. Perhaps we've taken a side in these arguments, but other than the self-satisfaction of being on the "right" side, done little to contribute to a constructive dialogue that would benefit our society.

Or maybe we've recognized that things are always far more complicated than people tend to make them out to be. Perhaps this realization has led us to a cynicism in which we give up putting any effort in trying to figure out what really is right and what is wrong.

The reality of the struggle between good and evil gets obscured by muddied waters.

In the world at large, one of the places where this struggle takes place involves two competing options regarding how societies should organize themselves.

One option is represented by China and Russia. Authoritarian regimes take away individual freedom and a free press with the promise that they will make societies function more effectively. The other option is democracy, of which the primary example traditionally has been the United States.

In recent years because of divisiveness, the pettiness and the muddied waters of "fake news", our country hasn't presented a very appealing vision to the world of what democracy looks like.

So there has been something hopeful about the clarity that has emerged in our country as we have witnessed from afar the unambiguous evil of Putin's invasion, and in that clarity discovered a unity we haven't known in quite a while, reminding us that what we have in common is far greater than the things that pull us apart. Democrats and Republicans worked together in ways we haven't seen in years in finding ways to come to the aid of the Ukrainian people.

Evil is real and evil is powerful, but an odd thing about evil is that it is most effective when it isn't clearly recognized. It is to the devil's advantage to have us be oblivious to the struggle between good and evil, which frankly is the state of mind in which we most commonly live.

The great Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn – a man all too familiar with Soviet era evil – made the point decades ago that ultimately the line separating good and evil runs not between political parties or religions, but rather through every human heart.

But it's understandable given the everyday realities of our lives we might miss this fact.

For the most part, we're all just trying to get by. It's all we can do it seems just to avoid being the sort of person who is clearly one of the "bad" guys – somebody overtly and obviously mean.

When Christianity asserts that we're all sinners, it means that while we may not be engaging in evil in big, obvious ways well, we're all doing so in what appear to us as fairly benign ways.

Mother Teresa of all people once said there was a little Hitler who lived inside her and that it was very important that she be aware of his existence. If Mother Teresa could say that, maybe we should acknowledge that there is a little Putin living inside us as well.

We routinely manipulate the people in our lives in subtle ways for our own self-centered purposes. We tell little lies -- half-truths that portray ourselves as better than we are, and allow us to avoid taking responsibility for our actions. Perhaps we join in a little gossip that maligns others. We are quick to condemn others while quick to justify our own little acts of inconsideration, even cruelty because we tell ourselves the person to whom we were unkind had it coming to them. We forgo the effort required to attempt to see things from somebody's else's point of view.

This is my point: good and evil are spiritual realities we deal with day in day out, and in the course of our lives it really does matter how we navigate these realities – the choices we make and the habits these choices bring about. To use Jesus' expression, it is possible in the course of our lives to "lose our souls" by the cumulative effect of the choices we make.

So, every so often – as is the case right now with Putin's invasion of Ukraine -- something occurs that allows us to see evil more clearly. And when this happens, perhaps we recognize in ourselves the willingness to acknowledge our faults and the desire to be a better human being, or to use a biblical word, to "to repent" – move away from evil and towards goodness.

Returning to the story of Jesus, it is relevant to our understanding of what is happening in Ukraine the way Luke presents the story of Jesus' death.

The cross isn't about somehow atoning for the sins of the world – no, it's a call to repentance. When Jesus dies, a Roman centurion is moved to declare Jesus' innocence, and the crowds who witness him die go home "beating their breasts" – which is short hand for saying they are moved by seeing Jesus die on the cross to acknowledge their own sin. Perhaps they went home and looked at the faces of their children and determined to live more loving lives.

For all who are paying attention, two things come into focus as Jesus dies upon the cross.

First, the unambiguous evil that conspired to have Jesus murdered.

And second, the extraordinary goodness of Jesus, who prays even for those who are caught up in that conspiracy: "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" He recognizes that they are blind to the evil that holds them in its sway.

So yes, Jesus even prays for Putin. In the distortion of his brain, Putin thinks he is on the side of good, heroically raising up the Russian people from their previous humiliation. He is deluded, and he is committing horrific atrocities, and yet there remains something deep down inside Putin that he is out of touch with that is worthy of love.

This spiritual insight relates to a very pragmatic concern as the crisis evolves.

Clearly, Putin miscalculated when he ordered this invasion. The question now is how does this horror story end? To the extent that Putin perceives the focus of the western world is taking him out personally, the more ruthless he will be. The urge to seek vengeance upon Putin could lead to a whole lot more innocent people losing their lives.

Meeting macho bravado with macho bravado could have horrific consequences.

We should pray for Vladimir Putin.

And we should recognize that the struggle between good and evil takes place at the center of the hearts of each one of us. As we witness the unmistakable evil causing such horrific suffering in Ukraine, let us each be moved to seek to live a more sacrificial life, expressing in our own imperfect way more of the goodness revealed so clearly in Jesus, who gave his life for us and all people.