

"The Lord heard our voice..."
Reading from the Old Testament: Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Reading from the New Testament: Romans 14:7-8

We are gathered in the liminal space of Lent, sitting on the threshold between the Jesus who said, "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him," and the Jesus who cried out, "My God ... why hast thou forsaken me," all-in commitment and assumption of abandonment, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Unlike Jesus' first followers, we know the horror of Good Friday is drowned by the joy and exultation of Easter Sunday. Yet, we too, see the world as it is and easily lose sight of a kingdom so identified with reconciliation and hope.

Though we longed for the day Covid would be dethroned from its reign as the dominant headline, we certainly weren't looking for this. The spectre of a smartphone chronicled war in eastern Europe has awakened memories for our boomers of those serious, yet impotent emergency schoolhouse drills where at the braying roar of the town's alarm, children would crouch under their desks or sit with their backs to the hallway brick and their heads between their knees, as if either 3/4" plywood or even a brick wall would protect you from a bomb 500 times more powerful than the one that leveled Nagasaki.

Of course, those apocalyptic images we try to push to the background as we now observe this dreadful invasion of Ukraine and witness the stalwart courage of its citizens. History reminds us that wars in Europe carry devastating consequences for the world order, and now a new generation is confronted with a threat not felt so viscerally since the height of the Cold War.

Imagine a family leaving in a rush, dishes in the sink, family photos still hanging on the walls, walking quickly out of a home to which they know they may never return; a father, his hand on a train window, his child's palm on the other side of the glass reaching out, the father knowing this could be the last and closest contact they will have; a young college student awkwardly holding a weapon for the first time in her life, paralyzed by the impossible choice of using a weapon or losing a nation she knows may already be lost. Yet, she stands in unity with her fellow Ukrainians, feeling powerless but still called to action.

You don't have to imagine these things; you can watch them on countless websites and satellite feeds. Ukrainians don't want war, but they've tasted enough freedom that they cannot step back. They know the odds, the colossal differences in strength, numbers, resources, but

escape offers no promises and neither does giving up, and right now, there's no hope hiding behind *Door #3*. Sometimes courage is not much more than the lack any better options.

The artworks on the chancel today represent the tragedy of authoritarian violence, the strength of shared community, and a prayer for peace. They were possibly among those destroyed in the Russian assault on Kiev. Folk artist Maria Prymachenko was a Ukrainian treasure. A polio survivor as a child, the daughter of an early 20th Century craftsman and carpenter, Prymachenko learned the Ukrainian arts of embroidery and hand-painted Easter eggs from her mother. Selling her crafts at the village market, Maria's work was noticed by an artist in Kiev who guided her into the national folk-art scene, and within a year Prymachenko's drawings were exhibited at the International Exposition in Paris where she won a gold medal, not to mention the praise of Picasso, who said, "I bow down before the artistic miracle of this brilliant Ukrainian." Chagall referred to his own animal paintings as "the cousins of the strange beasts of Maria Prymachenko."

(Rebecca Bengal, *Vice*)

Her use of bright colors and fanciful themes belied the traumas of the age. To the east, Stalin's Soviet grip on her land. To the west, the rise and advance of Hitler's Germany. Her fiancé went to war, never to return. Her brother was killed by the Nazis, and her whole career was spent under the authoritarian thumb of the powerful Soviet Union. The painting with the pairs of traditionally dressed Ukrainian couples holding hands is titled, *Our Army, Our Protectors*, and was painted in 1978 under the cloud of the Cold War and Breshnev's Socialist regime. In the painting she imagined regular Ukrainian citizens standing steadfast against Soviet rule.

The power and essence of community. A shared vision and prayer for a peaceable kingdom. Both elements are essential to what has sustained and strengthened peoples through the ages, in times of weal and woe, war and peace, health and distress, life and death.

An outside observer who knows the name, character, motivations, flaws, and hopes of those gathered here, or in any church, may well exclaim, "What in the world holds these fools together?" For wherever two or three are gathered there are typically ten grudges, twenty opinions, and forty neuroses. And yet, the choir keeps showing up,

there's a mood of civility absent in most other public gatherings, and maybe even signs here and there of tolerance and unexpected friendship. Even if they're not hugging one another, they at least demonstrate a willingness to be in the same room together week after week, year after year. The flustered observer might say, "I know these people. How is that even possible?"

Well, we answered the question with our first hymn: *O God our help in ages past; our hope in years to come*. Our church's charter hanging out on the wall may say we were formed in 1991, but that's not really true. The sign at one church I served said, *established some time prior to 1797*, but even given the imprecision of the estimate, that is no more true than our charter. The truth lies in our text this morning. "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm."

Jacob, son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham and Sarah, husband of Rachel, father of a nation (God even changing his name to Israel) - this is the story to which we must return if we hope to understand who we are, what makes us a church, and what holds us together, sustaining us through failure and triumph, conflict and friendship, sickness and health, and the promise that not even death will part us.

The verses I just read to you form an affirmation of faith recited as part of the liturgy for the offering of first fruits. Remembering who they are, how they came to be, who formed them and to whom they belong; they are moved to an act of gratitude, offering the first fruits of their harvest to the One who formed them, sustained them, and held them close. The offering was an acknowledgement echoing the words of the treasured hymn, *’Twas grace that brought us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home.*

It is important to note that though the affirmation begins with a singular first person voice, it quickly turns to the first person plural, acknowledging the essential element of community, a way of saying, *We got here, maybe wounded, weary, and worn, but we're here, and we never would have made it alone, the sum is stronger than the parts, knit*

together, held together, and guided together by the Lord who brought us together.

I have seen it and I have felt it time and again. Certainly, we were sustained by that, or more precisely, sustained by the power of God's Spirit at work through you following my father's death, just as we were sustained by that years ago following the tragic death of Donna's father. The words of your messages, the sight of your faces have always been life-giving to us.

This week, a member of my parent's church called my mom, who hasn't been able to be at church for some time, and she invited her and picked her up to go to their church's Ash Wednesday service. Do you know how huge that is? The healing power of friendship in faith. The touchpoint of community, the awareness that, like the people in Prymachenko's painting, we're in this together. What does Paul say? "But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love." This is the truth that has buttressed us since the time God chose

to stick with that rascally Aramean back in Palestine. "I will be your God, and you shall be my people."

Well, I read another one of those frown-triggering articles this week, you know, the ones penned with a well-studied, articulate, and personal voice, eloquently expressing why she wasn't going to be getting any ashes on her forehead on Ash Wednesday. She wasn't going to church any longer. Maybe one day she would go back, but not now. Yes, for her at least, organized religion and the institution of the church were fertile ground for duplicity, conflict, and pride. And then, she went and said it... I wasn't sure she would because her experience of the church hadn't been all bad. I wasn't sure she'd go there but she did. She just had to say it. Parroting the line they always think is sooo original, but has been heard by every preacher more often than Hank Aaron homered, the writer declared that a walk in the woods would be sufficient spiritual practice for her.

The woods. A mockingbird's song. She didn't mention sunsets, but you have to assume that was on her mind, too. I was reminded of the response Lillian Daniel offered the self-satisfied, sunset loving, woods walker who didn't see the need for church, communal worship, shared

mission, ministries of love, support, and self-giving. Daniels retorts, "You find God in the sunset? Great, so do I. But how about in the face of cancer? Cancer is nature, too." She's got a point. Is the sun going to show up at your house driving a Camry to take you to the chemo treatment? Think about it. Will those trees in the woods drop by with a platter of sandwiches when your spouse dies and the relatives are descending on your house, hungry after a long trip? Will the deer and the hummingbird give you a hand to hold and an ear for your lament when your child is in rehab? Will the golden leaves of fall challenge you to understand life is much deeper than the ranting of the latest demagogue with a microphone, more complicated than the facile promises of the advertiser? Will the bike or the Peloton or the pitching wedge engage you in the transformative work that alleviates suffering, heals cities and souls, and re-forms your spirit along the way?

Our father was a wandering Aramean and "The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm ... and he brought us into this place."

I like a good sunset. I enjoy a nice walk in the woods. But I am sustained by the grace of Christ and the spiritual fellowship of Christ's

church. I pray that we can hear, truly hear and take to heart the words offered by the Bishop of the Reformed Church of Ukraine to the churches in Ukraine: "We live in times when the so-called safe places are mostly gone. In the end, what remains is the church, the community, which is constituted in prayerful, true friendship and amicable relationship ... There is a need for the Gospel, for gathering praying communities, and for the ministry we owe to those left behind. Let us care for one another, remain humane, helpful and patient." (Bishop Sándor Zán-Fábián) So, enjoy the sunset but be the church. Amen.