

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour Lutheran Church
March 2, 2022
Ash Wednesday

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, last week, on Thursday, February 24th, our world changed.

Last week we learned of Russia's invasion of the sovereign state Ukraine.

And since that time we have been observing disturbing images on our television.

We have watched as Ukrainian families have traveled to the border of their country, their entire lives contained in only what they can carry.

And we have seen men saying goodbye to their families, because the Ukrainian men are not allowed to leave the country; they are required to stay and fight.

Yes, we have watched as thousands upon thousands of people leave their country as refugees, whereas only a week ago they were living peacefully in their homes.

We have also watched as long military convoys press into the Ukraine.

And, we have seen buildings destroyed, and burned out shells of vehicles in the streets.

And we have watched as Ukrainians received guns at their police stations, and we have watched Ukrainians making Molotov cocktails.

We have watched Ukrainians do whatever they can to resist the invasion.

We have also seen the many Ukrainian people taking safety in underground parking garages and subway stations.

We have seen people taking shelter as air raid sirens are sounding.

And we have seen Russian protests. We have heard of many Russians standing in protest against this war.

And we have seen the Russian authorities crack down on those protests and make hundreds of arrests.

And we have heard the pleas for help for the Ukrainians.

And we have also heard the harsh rhetoric and name-calling from the powers that are on both sides of the conflict.

And we have heard that severe economic sanctions have been put in place in Russia, and have seen the long lines at Russian banks as people withdraw their money.

And we have heard that Russian nuclear forces have been put on high alert.

PAUSE

We have observed and have heard all these things.

And we can only pray, we can only pray that cooler minds will prevail.

We can only pray that somehow somehow this conflict will NOT continue to escalate.

Indeed we pray that a peaceful end to this conflict will soon come.

PAUSE

Personally, when I watch the events unfolding in Eastern Europe, when I consider what may still come from all of this, I can only think of the phrase “the heart of darkness.”

We may or may not be familiar with that phrase “the heart of darkness,” a phrase that finds its origin from a short book of the same title written by Joseph Conrad, a book that recounts a river voyage into the African Congo.

In this fictitious book by Conrad, a riverboat captain by the name of Marlow, is travelling to find a Mr. Kurtz, an agent in the ivory industry.

And during this river voyage, Captain Marlow, witnesses the horrors of human depravity.

So, the book then is not just a physical journey into the mysterious African Congo.

No, the book is also a journey into the depths of the sin-sick, human soul.

The book is also about the journey into the proverbial heart of darkness located right here (POINT TO THE HEART).

PAUSE

If you saw the movie, *Apocalypse Now*, in which Francis Ford Coppola brilliantly captured Conrad's story against the background of the war in Vietnam, then you get the idea of what I am talking about.

And so, yes, when I watch the events unfolding in Eastern Europe, and when I consider what may still come from, I think of that phrase "the heart of darkness."

For me, it feels like our world is slipping deeper and deeper into some dreaded, unfathomable darkness.

PAUSE

Now, there is some irony here with respect to the timing of all these events in Eastern Europe.

There is some great irony here.

For tonight, the Christian Church begins its journey of Lent.

And, the journey of Lent, if nothing else, is a journey into the very heart of darkness.

Lent is a time that forces us to look starkly at our human sinfulness.

Lent is a time when we are forced to observe the depth of human depravity.

Lent is a time, is a voyage, like the voyage of Marlow, a voyage that brings us face to face with our own personal spiritual wasteland.

To be sure, Lent is a time that quite literally takes us on a journey into the very darkness on Good Friday when we observe the death of Christ on the cross within our Tenebrae service, the Service of Shadows.

And there is no greater depravity than our human sin which has resulted in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Yes, the timing of this conflict in Eastern Europe is ironic, such that it corresponds with the Lenten season.

On the television, on the news, from the images coming out of Ukraine we are seeing the heart of darkness.

This is the very worst of humanity. It is an example of the horror what human beings are capable of doing to other human beings.

It is the very worst of what humanity can do—spreading panic and fear, spreading death and destruction, uprooting families from their once peaceful homes, and separating members of families.

It is awful. It is tragic. It is truly heart-wrenching. It is the power of sin.

But as people of faith, because we are people who put their trust in God, in the face of such human tragedy, we cling nonetheless to hope.

PAUSE

On Ash Wednesday, yes, we remember the consequence of our human sin.

Yes, we remember tonight that because humans have sinned against God, we are dust and to dust we shall return.

Yes, we are but ashes, we are mortals, the direct result of our arrogant sin, the direct result of our prideful actions against God.

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Yes, that is the mantra tonight.

That truth that we are dust is all the more pronounced when we see on television the burned out ashy remains of vehicles on the road, and when we see the ashy, dusty rubble where buildings once stood.

The dust and ash of war settles and we see clearly the ravages, the consequences of human sin.

Yes, on Ash Wednesday, and during the whole of our journey of Lent, we confront the consequence of human sin.

That is why we put ashes on our forehead this evening.

It doesn't get any more pronounced than that.

Yes, we are ashes.

And so to remind us that the consequence of human sin is death and that we will return to the dust from which we came...

So, to remind us of the consequence of sin we put ashes on our foreheads.

PAUSE

But, in the face of the tragic reality of human sin, sisters and brothers in Christ, we nonetheless cling to hope.

We cling to hope in Jesus Christ, we cling to that grace of God in Jesus Christ, which is then why we wear our ashes in the sign of the cross.

The cross is God's grace. The cross is our hope.

The cross is God's reconciling power in the world.

The cross is God's grace, it is our hope, of which the apostle Paul spoke in 2 Corinthians.

In the verses immediately preceding our reading from 2 Corinthians, Paul says, "In Christ, particularly in Christ's cross...in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself."

This is our hope, this is God's grace, to which we cling all the more when we see (like we have on the news) the utter devastation of sin in the world.

The cross is the power of hope and reconciliation in the face of unfathomable sin.

PAUSE

Furthermore, Jesus tells us of those powerful instruments of reconciliation in the world—almsgiving, that is, generosity towards those who are in need...

And prayer, such that we pray boldly allowing our prayer to change us.

And fasting, such that we are not indulgent, such that we are not prideful, but that we are humbled, submitting to God's will.

These things: generosity towards those in need, bold prayer that changes the one who prays, and fasting such that we are humbled.

These things are the instruments of reconciling the world to God.

And praise be to God, the world is responding with generosity towards refugees, and responding with prayer for peace, and responding with humility and a change of heart in light of the conflict.

For when the world changes, like it did this past week because of the events in Eastern Europe...

When the world changes because of human sin, the way we combat the heart of darkness is by generosity, by prayer, and by humble submission to God's will.

These things in fact are embodied by Christ who dies on the cross.

Christ is the paramount example of generosity.

He gives his life for us.

Christ is the paramount example of bold prayer.

Jesus' prayer to God the Father changes and empowers himself, such as to lead him in service to the world.

Christ is the paramount example of humble fasting.

By his fasting, by Christ's 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus humbles himself, submits completely to the will of God.

Christ is our example of what it is to walk in the heart of darkness.

Christ is our example of what it is to confront the darkness with almsgiving, with prayer, and with fasting.

So then, in generosity, we give ourselves to others.

In prayer, we boldly allow for ourselves to be changed so as to serve.

In fasting, we humble ourselves thereby submitting to will of God for our lives.

Again, these are the means by which we confront the darkness.

These are the means by which we face the depravity of sin in the world and within our lives.

For just as much as there is war raging on outside us in the world at large.

There is also a war raging inside each one of us with respect to the power of sin.

And so we are reminded this day of the disciplines of Lent by which we wage a spiritual warfare.

And in this way, through the disciplines of Lent we hope, so as to emerge from the heart of darkness to see the heart of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.