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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Lent 1

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray. May the words of my mouth and 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, for six hours they met.

Now, I have no idea what the usual length is for such a meeting, but it seems to me that that that is a very long time meet indeed, regardless of the topic.

Yes, this past Monday, Ukrainian and Russian delegates met for six hours in Belarus to discuss the conflict in Ukraine.

Six hours. But we have no idea what exactly was the substance of those talks or if anything at all was resolved, except we were told that those delegations would try to meet again in the days ahead.

PAUSE

This Sunday, the first Sunday in the season of Lent is the Sunday when we hear about the temptation of Jesus by the devil.

Jesus is tested by the devil.

He is tested such that Jesus is tempted to take play God, "Turn these stones into bread, if you will."

Jesus is then shown all the kingdoms of the world, and he is tempted again to play God, "You can have all this glory and authority."

Finally, Jesus is taken to the pinnacle of the temple, and once more he is tempted to play God, "Cast yourself off this pinnacle, and angels will bear you up."

Yes, temptation is about trying to play God.

When we are tempted, we put ourselves in the place of God.

That is all that temptation is, trying to put ourselves in the place of God, it is our attempt to play God.

In fact, in the genius that was Martin Luther, he explained the Ten Commandments as exactly that.

The Ten Commandments are about countermanding our efforts to play God, countermanding our efforts to push God aside.

So, for instance, the first commandment is “Thou shall have no other gods before me.”

And all the subsequent commandments then are about how we make others things into gods.

All the other commandments are about how we play God.

The third commandment, for example, states, “Thou shall remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.”

The idol or god that that commandment countermands is work.

For we know that for many, work becomes their god.

Such that those persons who make work an idol are even described as workaholics.

Such people play God by claiming work as their end-all be-all.

Or, consider the fifth commandment, “Thou shall not kill.”

In this case, what is countermanded is the idol that is power.

In the case of the sixth commandment, “Thou shall not commit adultery,” the idol is lust.

In the case of the seventh commandment, “Thou shall not steal,” the idol is the desire for things.

In the case of the eighth commandment, “Thou shall not bear false witness,” the idol is fame and glory.

All of these commandments given by God, so said Luther, all the commandments of God are God’s way of countermanding our human desire to play God.

So, if we follow the first commandment perfectly, “Thou shall have no other gods,” there is no need for the other nine, so says Luther.

PAUSE

Now, at present, the world is watching what happens when a human being becomes so deluded as to think that he can play God.

The events in Ukraine are the result of an individual who has been tempted by power, who has been tempted by glory and fame.

That is how I would categorize what we see going on.

The unrest in Ukraine is the direct consequence of giving into temptation.

It is the consequence of trying to play God.

And as a result of such arrogance, there is tremendous and unthinkable suffering.

Yes, make no mistake about, sisters and brothers in Christ, the power of the devil is alive and well in this world.

Make no mistake about it.

But, I don't mean to say that Putin is the devil.

To be sure, I would not go so far to characterize anyone as the devil.

No, I don't think we should ever demonize any person like that.

People are people. We are frail. We are broken. And we are easily tempted. But we should not see anyone as the devil.

No person should be demonized.

But, I do think that the wiles of the devil can and does work on people's hearts to tempt them to do dreadful things.

And, this is only way I can make sense of what we see on television.

PAUSE

Now, it is interesting that in each of the temptations of Jesus in our gospel reading, Jesus responds to the devil with God's word.

Did we see that?

To the first temptation, Jesus responds, "IT IS WRITTEN, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

To the second temptation, Jesus responds, "IT IS WRITTEN, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

To the third temptation, Jesus responds, "IT IS SAID/WRITTEN, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

All these words from Jesus come from Scripture.

As an aside, notice that even the devil can quote Scripture, as he does to Jesus in the third temptation.

But whereas the devil quotes from the Psalms, Jesus quotes from the Torah, which trumps the devil because for Jews the Torah carries more weight than the Psalms.

Regardless, one lesson we might take from this passage about temptation is that temptation can be countermanded by the reading and hearing of Scripture.

In short, God's word might be used as a weapon against temptation.

And so, returning to the talks this past Monday, perhaps the Ukrainian delegation should have read from Scripture to the Russians to stop the aggression.

Perhaps, someone should read from Scripture to Putin to sway his heart that he might recall his forces from Ukraine.

But, aside from Scripture, there may be an even better way to oppose those tempted to play God.

PAUSE

With that said, I am going to do something that is a bit unorthodox, unheard of, in the Christian Church, and that is this.

I am going to refer to an Easter story in the season of Lent.

The typical practice is to avoid references to Easter right now, because we are travelling with Christ to his suffering and death on the cross.

Easter is a long way off, six weeks from now.

But, this story of Jesus' resurrection speaks volumes to the ongoing conflict.

This story, I think, is most important for dealing with those who play God.

The story is that of when the resurrected Jesus appeared before his disciples on that first Easter evening.

Jesus appeared before his disciples who were squirreled away in a locked room because they were terribly afraid.

They were afraid not only because the authorities who arrested and crucified Jesus may soon be coming for them.

But the disciples may also have been hiding in fear because they had heard that Jesus had been raised, and they were afraid because of how Jesus may respond to them.

Remember the disciples abandoned and forsook Jesus.

Peter even denied knowing Jesus three times.

So, who knows how Jesus will react to them, if indeed he has been raised. Jesus might bring upon them the wrath of God.

So, the disciples were in hiding, when suddenly Jesus appeared to his disciples.

And he said of all things, "Peace be with you."

He didn't rebuke them. He didn't say, "Why did you abandon me?" He didn't bring down God's wrath on them.

Instead, he simply said, "Peace be with you."

And then Jesus did this. He held out his hands and he showed them his side.

Why? Because he was revealing his wounds to them, not only to show them that he was who he said he was.

But I think Jesus was also revealing his human side, his human vulnerability.

He was showing that he had been wounded, he had been crucified, and yet, he could still offer them "peace."

In other words, even though Jesus is the very Son of God, he did not need to play God or to lord it over his disciples.

Jesus was willing to be vulnerable for their sake, and for ours.

It was an incredible display of mercy and compassion.

To me, it is what peace is all about.

Indeed, even in light of others succumbing to temptation, which results in the subsequent suffering, even so I think this is how we are to respond.

We are called to show our vulnerability, and we are to offer peace.

PAUSE

Again I come back to the talks this past Monday in Belarus.

They met for six hours, and we have no idea what was the exact substance of those talks.

But, I wonder if the talks would have been better served if the delegation from Ukraine had in fact come into that room saying, "Peace be with you."

And then for the Ukrainians to have shown the Russian delegation their wounds.

Maybe the Ukrainians should have brought with them the crying mothers and children, separated from their husbands and fathers.

Maybe the Ukrainians should have brought with them the bodies of Ukrainians and Russians killed in the conflict.

Maybe the Ukrainians should have shown the Russian delegation video footage of Ukrainian people flocking to the borders, taking from their former lives only that which they could carry.

Maybe the Ukrainians should have shown the Russian delegation video footage of the Russian people protesting in Russian cities and being arrested.

Maybe the Ukrainians should have shown the Russian delegation the people of world grieving for all of the innocent people affected in Russia, in the Ukraine, in Europe, and in the world.

Maybe the Ukrainians should have shown the Russian delegation all of those wounds and then some.

And after doing so, the Ukrainians could simply have said again, "Peace be with you."

And then just allow the Russians to sit with that for awhile, not saying anything else.

And when I say that Ukrainians could offer the words, "Peace be with you," I am not advocating that the Ukrainians to admit defeat and allow then their country to be taken over.

Those words, "Peace be with you," are much more complicated than that.

What I am saying is that the Ukrainians are offering "peace" so as to say we are appealing to our common humanity, we are showing you our wounds, and we ask for you to stop the aggression.

PAUSE

That is what I would have advised, if I had been giving advice to the delegation from Ukraine.

I am sure the situation is much more complex, but is it really?

Is it not as simple as seeing ourselves as one human family, and even though we are wounded, we can still find healing in mercy and compassion, if we are able to say, "Peace be with you."

PAUSE

I hope we can all take Christ's example of "peace" with us into our own relationships.

And so then, I hope we can avoid those times when we feel tempted to play God.

I hope we can avoid creating idols whereby we push God aside.

Yes, temptation is real. Yes, the devil is real.

But so is God and so is his Son Jesus Christ, and so is the power of Christ's cross in which he became vulnerable for all of us that we can find healing and peace.

Thanks be to God. Amen.