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Lent 3

Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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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, as many of you may know, I am not a big fan of flying.

Given the choice, I would go with just about any other mode of transportation.

Automobile. Train. Boat. You name it.

To get from point A to point B, I would rather travel by most any other mode of transportation than by plane.

And it is not because I am averse to having to get to the airport well in advance of the flight.

And it is not because I am averse to having to wait in line to go through the baggage check-in, and to go through security.

And it is not because I am averse to having to deal with flight delays and cancellations.

And it is not because I am averse to having to sit in a cramped seat on the flight.

And it is not because I am worried about the airline losing my luggage.

No, I am not averse to flying for any of those reasons.

No, the reason I am not a big fan of flying is because of the feeling of being without control.

I just don't like that feeling of having no control.

Now, I realize that that is rather irrational.

And yes, I realize that I don't have that much more control when it comes to being in a car on the highway, or riding in a train, or sailing in a boat.

Yes, I realize my feelings about flying are a bit irrational.

PAUSE

Now, recently, I have been recognized that I have had as of late a similar feeling about the world as that which I have about flying.

Lately, I have felt that with regards to the world I have no control.

Indeed, one can't help but feel the world is out of control with all that we have been hearing in the news.

It almost feels as though we are all being held hostage, being held against our will.

It is as though all the world's population is on a plane together, flying along, and the pilot is the Russian President Vladimir Putin.

PAUSE

And I have been wondering, "When did we all decide to let him sit in the captain's chair and take over the plane?"

"When did we all decide to give him control?"

I don't remember the world putting it to a vote.

I don't remember the world taking a poll, so as to decide that this man is going to be the one calling the shots.

But, that is how it feels in many respects.

That is how it feels, that we are all passengers on this unpredictable airplane flight, that none of us signed up for, that none of us bought tickets for.

Yes, to be sure, those feelings of mine where I feel I have no control as if I am on an airplane, those feelings have now been projected onto our present world situation.

Yes, to be sure, I have that same feeling of being without control.

PAUSE

But, the truth is, sisters and brothers in Christ, the truth is we were never in control to begin with, we were never in total control of the world.

That has always been the case, even though we like to tell ourselves that we are in control.

We are never in total control, even though we like to trick ourselves into believing otherwise.

We are never in total control, even though we create a pretty good illusion to the contrary.

And, unfortunately, it takes an event like a horrific war in Eastern Europe to wake us up to the fact.

PAUSE

But creating an illusion of being in control is something we humans like to do, almost feel compelled to do.

And we have been doing this ever since there have been humans.

Indeed, in the ancient world, our ancestors, liked to give themselves the illusion of some control, and they would do so by explaining tragic events as the result of God's intervention in the world.

Our ancient ancestors would explain tragic events as God's judgment upon sinful people.

This is, in fact, what we see going on in our gospel reading for this morning.

In that reading we hear that some of Jesus' followers are telling Jesus about the Galileans that Pilate had killed during their sacrifices.

Apparently, Pilate had taken bloody vengeance upon a group of worshippers in Jerusalem.

Now, we have no other historical source than Luke's Gospel that such an event had happened, but that should not make us doubt its occurrence.

It is certainly in keeping with what we know of Pilate.

And, it is apparent from our gospel reading that the belief was circulating that God had allowed for these worshippers to be persecuted by Pilate because they were sinners, and God was therefore exacting God's judgment upon them.

Jesus says, "Do you think that because Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than other Galileans?"

Never mind the fact that Pilate was just a cruel and violent ruler.

And the second tragic event recorded in our gospel reading is that of a tower collapsing on a group of people, killing eighteen.

Again, Jesus says, “Do you think they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?”

“No,” says Jesus. “These incidents are not some judgment from a wrathful God.”

Tragic events are not God’s way of punishing God’s people.

They just happen oftentimes without any explanation.

But the people in the ancient world, just like the people of today...

But, the people of the ancient world wanted control in their lives.

And one of the ways our ancestors created the illusion of control is by understanding unexplained, tragic events as the work of a wrathful God.

Now, to be fair, our ancient ancestors also believed that those good things, the blessings people experienced in life were also the work of God.

And theologians call this “divine retribution.”

In life, if you do good you will receive good, but if you do bad you will receive bad.

Divine retribution.

It was a way for our ancestors to gain a sense of control over their unpredictable lives.

But we know the concept of “divine retribution” doesn’t always hold water.

Sometimes good people suffer bad things, and sometimes bad people experience good things.

Divine retribution doesn’t always play out.

And perhaps because of this, and other reasons, Jesus in our gospel reading today pretty much debunks this notion of “divine retribution.”

“No!” Jesus tells us, tells those who are following him in this gospel reading, “No, God does not use Pilate’s cruelty and violence to punish sinners.”

“And God does not punish sinners by causing a tower to collapse on people and kill them.”

This is not how our God works. Personally, I could not worship a God like that.

PAUSE

So when we witness those horrible scenes coming out of Ukraine and Eastern Europe...

When we observe all the turmoil in our world resulting from this senseless war, I would hope we would not pin this on God.

If anything, God is grieving for our world right now.

If anything, God mourns the pain our human species is experiencing right now.

And so, what are we left with but a sense of feeling out of control.

PAUSE

A couple of questions come to mind then, don't they?

First, why does God allow tragedy to happen? What does God not do something about it? If God is all powerful, if God is omnipotent, why doesn't God step in and make everything right? Why doesn't God take control?

And why does there have to be evil in the world in the first place?

These are not easy questions to answer, but many theologians respond by saying that the reason there is evil in the world, and the reason God doesn't just step in and make everything right, etc. etc., is because of free will.

You see, God could have made the world perfect. God could have made the world so that there were no tragedies, no wars, no conflicts, but then we lose something of the very essence of what make us humans, that being free will, so say many theologians.

If God made humans to be perfect, such that we always followed God's will perfectly, such that we always did what is right and good, in short we would be robots, we would be automatons, each of us would be programmed to operate like some mechanical device.

And that is not what it means to be human.

So theologians often come back to this idea that the world is the way it is, humans are the way they are, and evil and sin are prevalent in our world, because God sees free will as so vital to our humanness.

Because of free will, broken and sinful people can, unfortunately, freely choose to do dreadful things to other people.

And the consequence is that the world can feel terribly out of control a lot of the time.

We really don't have control, we never have had control, it is but an illusion, the result of God making us to be humans who have free will.

I don't know if that helps, but it is how theologians often explain the dilemma of evil and sin, and the sense of no control in the world.

PAUSE

So then, what do we do in the face of tragedy? How do we respond to the horrors we see in the world?

Well, first we need to remember that God has already done something.

God has sent his Son Jesus Christ into the world to conquer sin and death, whereby then world and humanity are being remade, such that we can be a new creation.

Yes, the power of God has broken into the world, but the kingdom of God has not come in all its fullness, not yet anyways.

We live in what is called the in-between times, or what is also called the already-not yet reality.

God has already broken into the world in his Son Jesus Christ, but Christ has not yet returned to make all things new.

As people of faith, then, we wait in this in-between time.

As people of faith, we long for Christ' return.

Every day it is a little nearer, but when it will happen nobody knows.

So what do we do in meantime?

What do we do in this time when it still feels like there is no ultimate control in the world?

What do we do in the face of uncertainty? Well, Jesus tells us that we are to repent.

In the gospel reading, Jesus tells us that God does not pass judgment on people by persecuting them, like Pilate did to certain Galileans worshipping in Jerusalem.

Nor does God pass judgment on people by causing a tower to fall on them.

Nor does God pass judgment on people by causing a nation to rise up against them, like Russia has against Ukraine.

No, God doesn't work that way.

But make no mistake about it, it is situations like the war in Ukraine that remind us that this idea that humans have ultimate control over their lives is an illusion.

And thus, Jesus tells us that in the face of such disillusionment...

In those times when the veil is pulled back and we see that we are not in control...

When Jesus debunks our notions of control, he tells us that we should embrace the concept of repentance.

PAUSE

Now, repentance is this religious concept of turning around and going in the right direction. Repentance is about changing our lives.

But I would have us think of repentance as our act of embracing our relationship with God once again.

When everything feels out of control, we go back to the source of hope and reassurance.

When everything feels out of control, it's then that we find we are driven to God.

When everything feels out of control, we turn again to God and we give control of our lives over to Him.

And that is how we should define repentance.

In short, Putin only has so much control of this world as that which we are willing to give him, and unfortunately, over the years and in recent days he has been given a lot of control.

But to the contrary, if we give our lives over to God, if we allow God to take control of our lives, well then we become agents of God's power in the world.

So, let us repent, let us return to God, that God may have control of our lives, and in that we just might find the sense of control we had been looking for all along.

Thanks be to God. Amen.