

The Big If

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

1st Sunday of Lent - March 6, 2022

Texts: Deuteronomy 26:5-10, Luke 4:1-13

SCRIPTURE READING Deuteronomy 26:5-10

“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, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.”

GOSPEL READING Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan [where he had just been baptized] and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

“You are my Beloved Son.” –God

“*If you are the Son of God.*” –tempter¹

¹ Painting: Kramskoï, Ivan Nikolaevich, 1837-1887. Christ in the Wilderness, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. The poet and cultural critic, Rainer Maria Rilke, was profoundly affected upon seeing Kramskoi's painting of Christ in the Wilderness. "The painting portrayed a lonely Jesus sitting on a stone in a desert, lost in melancholy meditation. "Russian art does not become more narrow with its growing nationalism," Rilke concluded. On the

Did you hear the three “ifs” in the Gospel? All three are spoken by the devil. They are diabolical: cunning, poisonous, and powerful. The first and last are the same: “If you are the Son of God.” The devil’s “ifs” are designed to destroy Jesus’ confidence in the One who sent him, and in himself. But he has just heard the voice of God at his baptism, saying: “You *are* my Son, the Beloved.” Which voice will he listen to, the one that undermines his self-identity, or the one that assures him of who he really is? The second “if” is different. The devil says, “If you worship me.” The reward will be huge: all the kingdoms of the world. But the downside is, you forfeit your soul. The devil is going for a psychological win with Jesus. He loses.

The world right now is full of “ifs,” deadly potential scenarios that undermine trust in the safety and security of life as we know it.

Yes, evil exists. And evil must be countered. But evil is much more subtle and pervasive than the current aggression in Ukraine. Our country is not blameless before God, either. Which voice should we listen to? The voice that urges us to look out for ourselves first, or to take revenge on those we blame? Can we instead hear the voice calling us to respond differently, in a way that doesn’t return hurt for hurt, hate for hate, that doesn’t escalate violence? Can we hear the voice that Jesus heard, that insists, “You are a beloved child of God. And if you are, so is every other person on this planet, no matter how misguided their actions.” I believe we can.



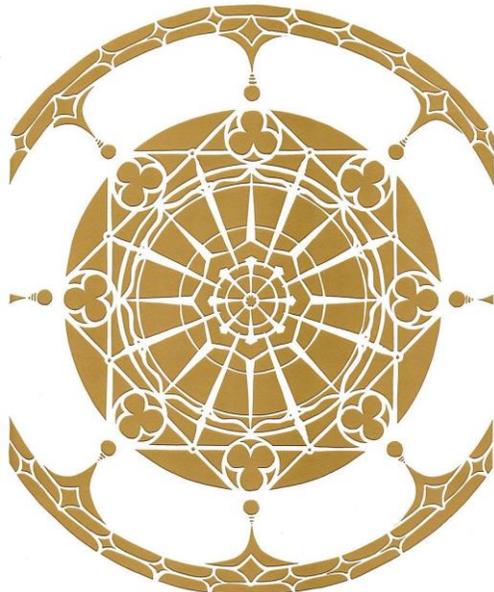
But we must take care how, or what, we worship. Sometimes it feels as though we rely less on God and more on military might. We feed the industries pumping billions of dollars of hardware into already deadly situations.² Who profits? Who wins? Those who make and sell the weapons.³ Who loses? The people on the receiving end of those soulless missiles and drones. Don’t we lose, too? Do we gain a victory - *if* we ever do - only to lose our souls? Certainly, we have been

contrary, "it may be in a better position to express the higher human universals if it completely abandons everything foreign, accidental, and un-Russian." Rilke's advocacy of Russian nationalism has often been misinterpreted by his critics. He was not proposing a return to the confines of a cult or mindless ritual, but he believed in art as a channel or a system of canals for focusing generally unformed national feelings and intuitions. To be authentic, Russian artistic images had to be intimately linked with millions of individual Russian souls." [from: *Rilke's Russia: A Cultural Encounter*, Anna A. Tavis. Northwestern University Press, 1997. p. 77.]

² <https://www.hungerward.org> The US provides ongoing military support for the bombing and blockade of Yemen, where every 75 seconds a child dies of starvation

³ <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2021/ProfitsOfWar>.

inspired by the valiant Ukrainians in these last few days. But the stories that move me more than the heroics of men with guns are those that lift up Ukraine's unarmed civilian resistance: removing or renaming road signs to confuse convoys, or stalling them by stacking roads with concrete blocks or sandbags, sometimes physically standing, hands open, in front of advancing tanks. Their actions and voices disrupt the confidence of the invading soldiers. They expose the poisonous lies.⁴ The stories that move me are of people around the world rising up to help, not with armaments of cold metal designed to kill, but warm human arms providing welcome, food, shelter, safety. I am moved that not just the PCUSA but Christians of all denominations and people of all faiths are reaching out in love and compassion, heeding a different voice, understanding that those we call enemies are human, too. And children of God. And beloved. Created for beauty, not brutality.



The artwork for today is deceptively beautiful. Yet hidden in the rose window and a down and swords, symbols of human power. At the very center, facing inward, are the nails that crucified an innocent man who refused to fight back with human strength and weapons. This is our story, our true Christian voice, based on the life and love and nonviolent resistance of Jesus Christ, who changed the world and is still changing it, because even death had no dominion over him. Is there really any other story to be told during Lent? The Easter story changes us, if we listen to it, if we open ourselves to the voice that says, "You do not live by bread alone, but by the voice of God. Worship and serve that God, and not the power of unlawful possession. You *are* God's own beloved child; accept your birthright. Don't test God, but rest in God, rest in faith." Listen to the voice that tells you, you can be the change you wish to see. Who you

are makes a difference. One person can change the picture, one note can change the song. Listen: the chord (D#, F#, A#, D) is harsh, discordant, painful. If you change one note (D to D#), it's merely sad. If you change one more note (F# to G), the feeling is utterly different: Joy is there. Hope is there.⁵ One note in the chord can make all the difference.

And so we change the world, one note at a time. One voice at a time. One person at a time. It can happen. It's not about you, and it's not about me. It's about the man Jesus who listened to the voice of God, the voice of good, and believed the truth about himself: "You are my Beloved Son, with you I am well pleased."

⁴ <https://www.yesmagazine.org/democracy/2022/03/01/ukraine-civilian-resistance?>

⁵ I found this poem in Steve Garnaas-Holmes's blog "Unfolding Light", Feb. 28. "What you can do."

When injustice strides so easily,
when evil reigns
and you feel there's little you can do,
remember we are all one.
You are part of the Great Oneness
—some call it the Body of Christ—
and what you do affects the whole.
You can choose goodness.
When you change your life you change the world.

An immense grace hums beneath
the noise of this world.
When you live in harmony with it,
you intensify the great music of life
that renews the earth.
You are a voice in the chorus,
a string on the Beloved's guitar;
when you change your note
you change the whole chord.

Hear. Believe. And follow. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers

In the muddle of voices coming at us from so many directions, may we hear most clearly your voice telling us who we are, and where we belong in this world. We pray especially for those whose governments deny them freedom of speech and freedom of hearing.

We pray for strength and courage for those who walk in your way - and on those who cannot walk just now; may they rest in your love on their way to healing: we remember all who mourn. May they be comforted.

As we pray today for peace with wholeness for those who suffer,
In Ukraine and Eastern Europe, but also Yemen, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Russia, in all the many conflicted spots on earth, may we undergird our prayers with tangible resources to help.

May we reach deeply, give generously, and welcome extravagantly.

May we lift our voices in a strong and unified advocacy.

May we all, even as we breathe in lament, breathe out mercy, hope and peace.

And in this Lenten season, when we walk the way toward death and resurrection, may we repent of our complicity in cultures of violence and renew our efforts toward justice and peace.

All this we ask in the name of the one who, when violence was committed against him did not respond with violence, only continued to love even his enemies, Jesus Christ, our Savior and teacher and friend. Amen