

Isaiah 58: 1-12
Psalm 103
Matthew 6:1-6. 16-21

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Year C

Ash Wednesday

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer, Amen.

Church bells ring and air raid sirens wail in Kyiv as I drove home from work last night. It seemed to capture the hope and horror of this time which is unlike any other I've known in my lifetime.

It's been a thrill to witness a world overwhelmingly united against evil. Shocked by the devastation of war, I'm simultaneously awestruck by the courage of Ukraine, a nation that understands what freedom really means -- even as it's brought to its knees as its civilians are bombed and shelled. "I hope you have sunflower seeds in your pocket," an elderly Ukrainian woman said as she confronted a Russian soldier, "so flowers can bloom on the ground where you fall." It's been reported that Russian soldiers are being left where they die to avoid any video or photographs of body bags being returned home. Many soldiers apparently did not even know where they were going to fight—or why—as they moved towards Ukraine and have been sabotaging their own vehicles when they find out. One Russian soldier who surrendered was given tea and food by Ukrainians who then let him call his mother and video chat. He broke into tears. Nearly a million refugees have fled for their lives— a migration unlike any other since World War II. Think of them when you get into bed tonight.

This is how we begin our journey with Jesus to Jerusalem and the cross this Ash Wednesday. There is no turning back. We walk in faith, with hope, alongside Jesus, a Jew, who stood up to an evil empire, without an army or a weapon, only a courage born of love. Who he was and what he stood for was non-negotiable.

President Zelensky, also a Jew, who lost many family members in the Holocaust, is standing up to Putin's evil empire, with a courage born of love, too. When offered safe passage out of Ukraine by the Americans he said didn't need a ride, he needed ammunition. Acknowledging that he is Target #1 in Putin's sights, and his wife and two children are Target #2, he has shown the world what courage means when it is truly born of a love larger than one's self. Zelensky, the former comedian is now no joke—he's willing – and may well -- die for Ukrainian freedom.

How shameful it seems that in this country— defending freedom these past two years has been reduced to denying science and fighting against mask wearing. And this year, giving up chocolate for Lent seems, well, somehow to be beside the point.

It is hard to sort and understand, the feelings I have this Ash Wednesday, as I am humbled by the courage of the Ukrainians. Who am I? What do I stand for? The collar I wear as a priest gives me an easy out. Am I willing to die for my faith, my country? To live for something larger and greater than myself? I hope so but this morning when I saw a few hundred Ukrainians blocking a highway to protect a nuclear power plant from Russian tanks with only their bodies I wondered how brave I really am.

What do these 40 days have to teach me, you, us? We are pilgrims, all of us and after two years of Covid, we've given up plenty already. The pandemic felt like a crushing, endless, Lenten march but to where? Truth is most of us hate sacrifice and just want to race back to life as we knew it. But the world, as we knew it, is over. We are never going back to who and what we were. The pandemic made that problematic, but the war makes it impossible as we are watching a dual between good and evil that could send nuclear missiles out of their silos.

Don't let anyone ever tell you can't have faith and fear. I've got plenty of each. The choice is for me to choose which one I will nurture and feed.

On Ash Wednesday, we acknowledge the central truth that from "dust we come and to dust we shall return." Humbling and powerful words that send us on our way for 40 days.

For years, when I've said those words in hospitals as I administer ashes I then say, "and trust in the power of the resurrection" and the fact that I do is why I am able to stand before you as a priest: proclaiming the truth of what my soul knows.

But there are no shortcuts, no end runs around the wilderness and the bitter cup. Writes Debie Thomas in a "Journey with Jesus" essay from 2020:

Maybe we, like Jesus, need long stints in the wilderness to learn what it means to be God's precious children. Because the unnerving fact is this: we can be beloved and uncomfortable at the same time. We can be beloved and unsafe at the same time. In the wilderness, the love that survives is flinty, not soft. Salvific, not sentimental. Learning to trust it takes time...if the cross teaches us anything, it teaches us that God's precious children bleed, still ache, still die. We are loved in our vulnerability. Not out of it.

And the truth is, as always, that we already have what we need. But we forget it over and over again. Two months ago we rejoiced as the Prince of Peace was born in the manger to Mary-- a defiant teenager-- whose "Yes" to God came from a courage born of love--nothing more. But her courage changed the world.

In one of the oldest meanings of the word in French, courage comes from the words "couer" and "large" -- hearts open and big enough to risk doing the unthinkable because of a courage born of love.

You and I have that same courage. Maybe it has been hidden, ignored, discounted. Maybe you can't imagine that in this life you already have what you need, as God's beloved. Dive deep

inside yourself this sacred Lent, seeking again, and lifting up the broken bits of yourself. The places where you have been shattered by sin, shame, disappointment, and regret.

There is no better time than now, no more sacred time than Lent to do this holy work. If you are truly able to enter the silence of this time and traverse its barren wilderness you may be astounded to find that God is right there waiting for you, his beloved child. We have been baptized into a courage born of love in Jesus' name. It changes everything; always has and always will, but only if we let it.

“If you have kept Jesus at a distance, step forward,” wrote our Bishop Daniel Gutierrez today. Continuing he said, “If you have been indifferent, take a risk. If following Jesus seems difficult, and it will be, do not be afraid. Your relationship with Jesus is not a restriction, it is a liberation.” And if we continue to liberate ourselves, we'll begin to liberate our beleaguered world.

AMEN