

The Pain of Ukraine
 The Feast of the Transfiguration
 Luke 9: 28-43
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 The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry

I propose to show that we as people of faith are called to bear witness both to the glorious and the perilous, so that those hearing this sermon will not turn away from our sisters and brothers in Ukraine.

War. War makes everything different. Have you noticed? I had things I was worried about last week, but this week, after Tuesday night they all seem rather small and insignificant. War in Europe changes everything.

As we all know, our country, up until recently, has been at war with Afghanistan. A confrontation that lasted for more than two decades. Yet many of us, unless we had a friend or a family member deployed in Afghanistan or Iraq, seemed to have let that military engagement slide from our central focus. Shame on me for letting that happen in my own comings and goings.

This war feels different.
 Ukraine's proximity to the rest of Europe,
 our shared history of catastrophic world wars in Europe,
 and the reality that Russia dictated by Vladimir Putin,
 began this conflict, completely unprovoked.
 This does not feel
 like a response to an act of aggression,
 instead, this feels
 like a naked grab for dominance.
 a bold geopolitical act
 meant to assert control and authority
 over significant assets and resources
 based upon a fanciful retelling of history
 and imagined future threats.

An act that is likely to embolden other authoritarian world powers
 to undertake similar schemes.

This then is where we are.

People of faith,
 watching and feeling
 the political tectonic plates of our world
 shift and collide.

How do we stand? Where is our sure footing? What are we called to do?

Peter, James and John, accompany Jesus to the high mountain. They are tired and weary, yet they have seen Jesus do much: staunch a woman's flow of blood, heal Jairus's daughter, feed 5000 hungry people. So, they travel up the mountain with him. Which mountain? We do not know, but what we do know as biblical scholars Ben Witherington and Amy-Jill Levine say, for the author of Luke, up high, on a mountain of any sort is always closer to God. (*The Gospel of Luke: A New Cambridge Bible Commentary* p 260)

As Jesus is on the mountain praying, he is transfigured, changed, illuminated, transformed. Peter, James and John, although almost asleep see it all take place. They lift their weary eyes and see Jesus changed and see him speaking with two others. We are told it is Moses and Elijah, how the apostles know this, is anyone's guess. But for the people hearing this piece of scripture for the first time, being told by the author of Luke that the two fellows talking to Jesus are Moses and Elijah, would cause some to see a coming together of the Torah with Moses and all the writings of the prophets with Elijah. So that some might be able to say that Jesus is bringing together the hopes and promise of the Hebrew bible. It is momentous.

Peter responds to the enormity of the situation. Peter always a man of action. He says, "Let's build three shrines and mark this place as Holy. People are going to want to know what happened here. They are going to want to come here and stay. I love Peter. To be clear, this would be me. Ok friends, let's get something concrete accomplished people. We have mark this win...Jesus, Moses and Elijah all together—this is important. ...

But it seems that
tangible markers,
tallies on a scorecard,
shrines on a mountain
are not really what Jesus' ministry is all about.

As Peter is speaking, creating his plan,
a cloud overshadows them
and the apostles hear a voice, saying,
"This is my son, my chosen one. Listen to him."
James, John, and Peter are overcome with awe
and that's enough for God.

Marking the moment,
staying on the mountain longer than required,
that's neither the call, nor the task.

Static proximity to what was Holy
can never substitute
for immersing ourselves

in the needs and pain of the world.
 Neither Jesus, nor his apostles,
 nor any of us who long to follow in his ways,
 can isolate ourselves or stay too long away
 from the pains and needs of our world.
 Jesus came into our world,
 to be in relationship with every human being
 and so too must we.

One day later in the story and the next line in the scripture, Jesus, Peter, James and John are down from the mountain and immersed in the crowd who have been waiting. Amidst the roiling needs of humanity, there is a shout, from a father, who is in agony, because his son is in pain. Any one of us who has children, or loves someone, has an idea of how this might feel. The man may have walked miles and waited days to see Jesus. To beg Jesus, to heal his son. To make him whole. His son is possessed, in some way, filled with an evil spirit, tortured shaking, screaming. Jesus' other apostles have tried to heal the boy, all failing miserably.

Jesus, seemingly furious at the pain the boy feels, pain that could be stopped, yells at all of them and then speaks harshly to the evil spirit and the boy is healed.

Friends, I cannot but think
 that the people of Ukraine
 are possessed by an evil spirit:
 shaking, bombing, tormenting them.
 I fear that we who are not in harms way,
 may want to stay far away,
 high atop our metaphorical mountains
 where we feel safe.
 I fear we may want to camp here,
 because we like those hapless disciples,
 supposedly with the power to heal this great wound,
 have no idea what each of us,
 as individuals and communities of faith
 might do to help.
 At least I feel that way.

Each time I look at the news I feel more afraid, more sad,
 and I have to fight the longing to turn away
 and go back to the rest of my life.
 But I think, like Jesus, Peter, James and John,
 we must immerse ourselves
 in the pain and needs of the world.
 We must come down from the mountain.

We must be like the women, the faithful women
who stood at the foot of the cross,
and bore witness to Christ's pain.
Women who would not leave or look away.

We too must be witnesses to this suffering in Ukraine.
And when the time comes,
we must be the ones ready to anoint the battered bodies.

What do I mean? Pray my friends.
Pray in a way you never have before.
Pray with the passion and responsibility
of being the people who are called and empowered to heal.

Read the news, do not look away.
Talk about the suffering we are seeing.
Talk about it endlessly, bear witness to it.
Suffering caused
by unbridled aggression and unfettered greed for control.

Name the evil that is taking place.
Talk about the people
whose homes and lives are crumbling around them.
Imagine it is you, your life, your children.
Then, **embrace the sanctions and the ramifications those sanctions will have for us.**
Embrace the sanctions and the discomforts they will have for us.

Evil wins when we look away and pretend
that the pain does not exist and
that the wound does not weep.
Love wins when we follow Jesus
down the mountain
and into the needs of the world
and use all, all, all
we have to say, 'NO.'

God will use us and Love will win,
when we honor and embrace the pain
as if it were our own.

Amen.