

2nd Sunday in Lent, March 13, 2022

Luke 13:31-35; Genesis 15:1-12; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Psalm 27

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

“When evildoers close in against me to devour my flesh...” “though an army encamp against me...” “Though war rise up against me...” “Subject me not to the will of my foes, for they rise up against me, false witnesses breathing violence.” These words from Psalm 27 seem eerily relevant this morning as the war in Ukraine continues to dominate the news, at least the news that I am seeing and seeking out, with stories of the indiscriminate bombardment of cities, including apartment buildings and hospitals. I think that too often for me images like these in Psalm 27 pass me by. I instinctively classify them as colorful or rhetorical, abstract concepts, or maybe even hyperbole, exaggeration for dramatic effect. But not as words referencing the reality I experience. I expect that you are probably not unlike me in that regard. Although as a historian I have read a lot about war, particularly the history of World War II and the American Civil War, in my mind those were long ago and far away. They are epic tales, safely in the past, in which the good guys won and the bad guys lost. I have not even come close to experiencing actual war first hand with its terror and uncertainty. And yet right at this moment, nine time zones away, this is a devastatingly painful reality for millions. But Ukraine is only one place where war is raging. Thousands have been killed in Myanmar and Yemen since the beginning of the year. I had to go looking for that information. And tens of thousands more were killed last year in wars in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan. And those are just the major wars. Other smaller conflicts are spread out across the continent of Africa and western and southern Asia. And let’s not forget Mexico, our neighbor to the south, where fighting among organized crime factions has killed 1,300 people already this year, six to eight thousand last year, and something like 400,000 over the past 15 years. Of course even we are not exempt. While you might not classify it as a war, violent crime is on the rise recently, with around 20,000 killed in the U.S. in each of the past two years alone. If Psalm 27 strikes us as hyperbolic or rhetorical, we need to realize that it describes a reality for many people across the globe and in our own backyard, and that there but for the grace of God go you and I.

I think that maybe because we don’t share the psalmist’s reality of imminent danger, we also may disregard the solution that the psalmist offers, namely a confident trust in the Lord amidst all trouble. Our three other readings this morning work together to give us help with coming around to this solution and informing our own response to the challenges facing us at this moment.

The first reading from Genesis is the second encounter of Abraham with God, the second promise to make of Abraham and Sarah a great nation. It will not be the last. And that’s because in spite of God’s promise, its fulfillment has been delayed. That accounts for Abraham’s frustration here. God repeats the promise, but Abraham pushes back. “Yeah, I remember you promising to “make a great nation” of us, to give us descendants. I remember that, but I also have eyes and a brain. We are old. We have no children. That hasn’t changed since the first time you made the promise.” “As it stands, now,” says Abraham, “one of my slaves will be my heir. Give me something more than a promise.” The strange story that follows, with the animals cut in two and the torch passing through the middle of them is an ancient version of “cross my heart and hope to die.” It is a symbolic way for God to tell Abraham, “I really mean what I have promised you. This is my solemn vow!” As we know from later on in the story, Abraham and Sarah will not be satisfied even with this. Rather than “waiting on the Lord,” they will attempt to

take matters into their own hands by providing Abraham a descendent through Sarah's slave. But we also know that in the end, God does make good on the promise.

Our second reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians is an appeal to the church at Philippi not to be tempted to live according to the values of this world that urge us, as I noted last week, to serve ourselves. To do so would betray a lack of trust in the coming kingdom of God that Jesus has promised, and to accept that the world as it is arranged now, as it works now, is the way it will remain. "This is not our country," Paul says. "We are not citizens of this state of affairs. We belong to Christ. Our allegiance is to him and to his kingdom. And his kingdom is not just the same old arrangement with a different guy at the top. It is a completely different reality, a completely different way of living and acting."

And finally there is this encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees in our Gospel reading today. And it's an unusual one. We usually see the Pharisees as Jesus' main opponents in the Gospels. And they were. But of all the different religious movements at the time – and there were a bunch, just in case you think our situation today is unique – of all those different groups, the Pharisees were actually closest to Jesus' teaching. You may also experience that the people who are closest to you are the ones you have the most painful conflicts with. So it's difficult to know whether the Pharisees here see Herod as a common enemy and are actually trying to help Jesus, or whether they are taunting him: "You'd better run and hide! Herod's out to get you!" But whatever they had in mind, Jesus' response is clear. "Oh, I'm *going* to my death, alright, but Herod does not control this. I will not be killed while I am about my business of healing and casting out demons. But yes, I am going to my death." So whether the Pharisee's warning was meant as a taunt or a helpful caution, Jesus' is not deterred from his mission by the threat that Herod poses. He is free to love and care for those afflicted by sin, death, and evil.

So what does all of this mean for us? First of all, for those of us who have been insulated from the more difficult and desperate realities of human existence, Psalm 27 serves as a reminder – if the news out of Ukraine and other hot spots around the world isn't doing that already – that our experience is not universal, nor is it guaranteed to be permanent. Armies encamp. War rises up. Evil seeks to devour. It has ever been so; we're just noticing it more these days. So, it is into this kind of world that we are born, but secondly, and even more importantly it is into this kind of world that we are *reborn* in Holy Baptism: not to be aiders and abettors of the world as it is, but to be messengers and agents of the new world that God is creating in our midst, right under the noses of encamping armies, threatened violence, and devouring evil. Death is in the future for all of us. To be controlled by the fear of death is to be conscripted into those encamped armies and agents of violence and evil. But because we are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, because we already participate in his risen life, death is no longer the threat it once was. Confident that the life Jesus gives us through baptism is the only life that matters, the life that really is life, and life that is everlasting, we are freed to be the body of Christ, in the world to love the world, to be agents of God's care for those afflicted by sin, death and evil.

May it be so. May we trust that promise and not be deterred from Christ's mission that is happening in and through us. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.