2nd Sunday in Lent, March 16, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Psalm 27; Genesis 15:1-12; Luke 13:31-35 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, IL

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

One of the pastors in the online text study that I have been part of for the past couple of years, is the pastor of a Latvian Lutheran congregation in Cleveland. Latvia, as you know, is one of the former Soviet Baltic Republics, up there south of Finland, between Russia and the Baltic Sea. And there have been Lutherans in Latvia almost since the Reformation. As we were talking about the texts for this Sunday, my Latvian colleague wondered with us how she was supposed to preach these texts to her congregation as Russia now looms as an increasing threat with the change of administrations in the U.S. and our current president's reluctance to support Ukraine in its war with Russia, or even to acknowledge that it was Russia that started the war in the first place. This Latvian congregation not only has close ties to Latvia, but they are actively supporting Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. How are Latvians and Ukrainians and other people threatened with existential threats supposed to hear these readings? Is their take away simply to pray our Psalm today and hope that God will intervene and turn this war around? —kick out the Russians and end this invasion? Are they supposed to do nothing in the meantime to resist the Russians?

Before we attempt an answer, I think we have to come to grips with just how much the context of our readings differ from our own reality. Take these verses from our Psalm, Psalm 27, for example. "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. But I think that too often images like these in Psalm 27 pass me by. I instinctively classify them as colorful or rhetorical, exaggeration for dramatic effect. 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. And Ukraine is only one place where war is raging, or where people are plagued by violence, or live in fear that violence will soon become a reality for them. 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. In fact, I think it's fair to say that the kind of life you and I consider normal and take for granted, a life largely free from violence and warfare, is the exception and not the rule for most of human history and still in many places in the world today.

So no wonder the biblical texts are steeped in violence too, and why the central event of our Christian faith is a case in point. Violence is endemic in our human condition. And it's where our Gospel reading is of course directing our attention this morning. But to better understand that, let's first touch on that first reading from Genesis, because there is a surprising connection. This reading is the second time God promises 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." 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!" This is a ritual that would have happened between two people in ancient times who were making significant promises to each other. And the meaning is this: each of the two people conducting the ritual are effectively saying, "If I fail to keep my part of the bargain, you can do to me what we did to these animals." Now it's one thing for two people to make this kind of agreement, but God? How is someone going to "cut God in two" if God doesn't keep God's promise? Well, we don't get to find out in the Abraham and Sarah stories, because we know that God eventually does deliver on the promise, and that this old couple becomes the ancestors of the nation of Israel.

So how does this set up Jesus and his determination to "be on his way" to Jerusalem and the cross that awaits him there? Well, I don't know if this is what the lectionary folks had in mind, but the nation that Abraham and Sarah give birth to will again and again break the covenant that God makes with them. And though they are indeed cut in two when the northern tribes are conquered and sent into captivity in Assyria, and though 150 years later the southern tribes are also conquered and exiled, God does not allow this to be the end of the story for God's chosen people. God will not give up on them even when they give up on God. And in Jesus, a new kind of covenant is made. In this covenant, though, we do not live with the constant threat of being destroyed by our inevitable failures and unfaithfulness. In this covenant, God not only continues to be faithful but God also bears the consequences of our failure to live as God intends, and opens for us a new and better way to that life. (If you want to think more about how to make sense of Jesus' death, come to the Adult Sunday School class today and for the rest of Lent, where we're wrestling with that topic.)

But where does that leave us now? And where does it leave my Latvian colleague and her congregation? How are we to react when we are faced by existential threats? That might be an abstract question for us at the moment, as I said earlier, but it is a very real question for many people around the world. When Jesus was pressed to give a simple answer to the question, "how shall we now live?" he answered, "Love God and love your neighbor." And when pressed on who counts as a neighbor, on whom we have to help and whom we can safely ignore, Jesus turned the question around. Think of the people you usually exclude from your attention and your concern, and then think again. Think about who you can be a neighbor to, even if they're typically off your radar."

So loving God, trusting in God's promises, and loving our neighbor in such a time as this might look like continuing to aid Ukraine in its defensive war, and urging our leaders in that direction. As evil as war is, and war is always evil, sometimes war might be the most faithful response to an existential threat, or let us say, sometimes war is the least unfaithful response. It is what a mother hen does when her chicks are threatened by a fox: she puts herself between the fox and the chicks, to use Jesus' own analogy, even though that means risking her own security. But let's also be clear, there is no such thing as a just war, and there are no sinless options in this life. And I might be wrong in my estimation that defending Ukraine by force is the best available option. And so as we love our neighbor as best we can, we also love God as best we can by trusting in God's promise of forgiveness for Jesus' sake, and by repenting of the evil we participate in for the sake of our neighbor. "Sin boldly," Luther once advised, "but trust in Christ even more boldly." Life is messy, but in Jesus Christ God is with us in the mess, and the Holy Spirit is at work on us through his promise of life. May we count on that promise and put it to work for our sake and the sake of the world God loves. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.