

Affirmation and Resistance
A Sermon on Luke 4:1-13 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ March 6, 2022

Today is March 6th, the 11th day of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Truth is being revealed in the struggle between those motivated by goodness and those motivated by evil intentions. The struggle to learn and tell the truth and to do what is right is in the center of life for those who follow Jesus.

This is the theme of our passage from Luke chapter four. Jesus goes into the desert regions in the southern part of Judah. Jesus is tempted by a character called 'the devil'. The devil tempts Jesus with the idea of using his power as a power over others. Jesus resists this temptation and affirms God's power is a power of relationships and mutuality.

Then the devil gives Jesus a view of all of the kingdoms of the world. The devil lies to Jesus. The devil promises to give him the glory and power of being ruler of all of the kingdoms. The devil promises to give these things to Jesus if he will bow down and worship him. Jesus resists the temptation of making lies the foundation for action. Jesus affirms God's power in our lives is based in knowing and telling the truth.

Then the devil places Jesus on the top of the Temple. The devil urges Jesus to throw himself down in order to test his relationship of trust and support with God. Jesus resists this temptation of self-centeredness. Jesus affirms God's kingdom is a community of relationships where we build trust with one another. Jesus resists the devil's invitation to test and break these relationships through selfish demands.

The story of Jesus being tempted by the devil becomes more meaningful for me with each passing year. The story illuminates universal temptations that extend across time and culture. You and I see many people around us succumbing to these temptations: the temptation to be greedy or seek power over others, the temptation to make falsehoods and lies the foundation for our lives, the temptation to break relationships of trust through our words and actions.

A related story of the struggle between good and evil is unfolding before our eyes each day in these cold weeks leading into Spring. The Spring of 2022 will be remembered for the struggle between good and evil in Ukraine and in neighboring countries.

Let us learn from this story. Let us remember that this struggle between those with evil intentions and those with intentions to uplift and care for creation and humanity is continuous. This invasion of Ukraine began eight years ago. We see the conflict clearly because of new technology and the connections of Ukraine with our world. We may feel the pain and conflict more directly because some of our ancestors may have lived within a day's drive of the war zone. Let us remember this struggle is continuous with the struggle for goodness, truth and justice in Burma, in Rwanda, in Honduras, in the United States and in many other places around the world.

Let us be more of what God is calling us to be in this moment. Let us be more empowered to use the gifts God is giving us. Let us put our values into action. Let us do what Jesus did, which is to make a direct connection between God's mission and the struggle for goodness for all people. Let us do what Jesus did, which is to live lives of affirmation and resistance in the face of evil.

With the people of Ukraine, let us live lives of affirmation and resistance. The women and men of Ukraine are affirming that every individual has a vital role to play in the struggle for rights of expression, democratic government and mutual relationships. In Ukraine young children, grandmothers, volunteers of all ages and President Zelensky are resisting evil and affirming the goodness of humanity. Vladimir Putin launched this war eight years ago in an attempt to snuff out the Revolution of Dignity, in which the people of Ukraine overthrew their anti-democratic government. The people of Ukraine are affirming the vital importance of democratic government. Let us learn from their story. Let us be empowered. We can support the people of Ukraine by strengthening democracy in our community and in our nation.

With people who live in countries that share borders with Ukraine, let us live lives of affirmation and resistance. People in Poland, Romania, Hungary, Moldova, Slovakia, Latvia, Germany and elsewhere are giving direct aid to refugees from Ukraine. They are welcoming refugees into their homes. They are

building new relationships with strangers. Some are acting with deep strength to welcome people who look different or speak different languages.

Let us learn from their story. Let us be empowered. We can support the people of Ukraine turning away from self-centeredness. We can support the people of Ukraine by building relationships in our communities. We can affirm the human rights of people under attack by Putin's armed forces by caring for those in greatest need in our communities and in our nation.

With the leaders of the United States and other democratic nations, let us live lives of affirmation and resistance. Our President, Secretary of State, Ambassador to the United Nations, and other leaders have been relentless in working with partners in other nations to resist the lies and violence of Putin's government. The war inflicted on Ukraine is terrible. The situation could be much worse. The situation will almost certainly get to be much worse in the coming days.

It makes a difference that our leaders are working with other leaders who, though imperfect, often adhere to values espoused by Jesus: aversion to violence, respect for human life, and willingness to speak truth to power. It makes a difference that our leaders are sincere and engaged in their support for democracy and human rights.

I have my doubts as to whether this character called 'the devil' is real. But I have no doubt that if the devil were in the room right now, you can be sure he would argue the cynical point of view. The devil would say, "They are all corrupt. All of those leaders are only concerned for their own power." The devil would say, "Who are we to try to stop Vladimir Putin? Do you think the United States has always been perfect?" That is what the devil would say if he were in the room today. Cynicism is antithetical to the Gospel message. We cannot be following Jesus if we are following the path of cynicism. We cannot be following Jesus if we are refusing to engage with sincerity and hope.

Let us learn from the example of our leaders. Our leaders have not turned their backs on the people of Ukraine. They have been engaged and used their powers with wisdom. Let us be empowered. We can support the people of Ukraine by being engaged in the struggle and resisting the voices of cynicism.

With anti-war protestors in Russia, let us live lives of affirmation and resistance. There have been many brave people in this particular chapter in the struggle. None have shown more bravery and courage than those who have protested against Vladimir Putin's war in Russia. In sixty cities across Russia over 9000 protestors have been arrested. On February 27th, Russian protestors began using a new tactic, which was to hold many, single person protests in a variety of locations throughout the cities at the same time. In the fourth largest city in Russia, so many people were arrested for protesting the war that the detention center set aside to detain them was filled to overflowing.

Let us learn from the bravery and example of our Russian brothers and sisters. Let us be empowered. These Russian women and men are speaking the truth in a nation where millions of people have been jailed or killed for their thoughts and their words. We can support them, and support the people of Ukraine by learning and telling the truth.

With people around the world today, let us live lives of affirmation and resistance. Today people of many nations and creeds stand united with the people of Ukraine. People of many languages and places are doing some small piece of work to support them and be united with them. Let us be united. Let us support the people of Ukraine by working to end divisions and build relationships of trust and support in our own communities.

In this time in the middle of the struggle, do not be discouraged. Know that this is part of a long struggle that continues from the time of Moses, leading the children of Israel out of Egypt, to the present time. The struggle is long and continuous. Yet in heart of the struggle we empowered by God's hope.

Let us be more of what God is calling us to be in this moment. Let us be more empowered to use the gifts God is giving us. Let us do what Jesus did. Let us live lives of affirmation and resistance in the face of evil.