

Neutrality is not an Option
A Sermon on Matthew 4:1-11 by the Rev. Philip Major
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On Friday we observed the one-year anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is quite likely this war will continue for many more months, perhaps for many more years. In my estimation, Russia's invasion of Ukraine will be one of the most significant events of the 21st century and will shape our world for several generations.

We are blessed that we have several gifts that remain constant through the many changes and traumas of our lives. One of those gifts is the gift of Holy Scripture. Indeed, today's Gospel reading illustrates the fundamental truths we need in order to guide us in this dangerous and uncertain time. But before discussing our current predicament in greater detail, let's consider what we have learned about God's values and God's actions and God's intentions for the world.

God's will for the world can be expressed with just two words. More love. God's intention, God's will, God's plan is for there to be more love in the world.

Since God's will is for there to be more love in our lives, God's values and energies are not neutral in the conflicts and struggles we experience. When it comes to bringing more love into the world, there are clear right and wrong directions. God was not a neutral actor in the great, extended struggle for civil rights for black Americans in the mid-20th century. God is not a neutral actor in the great, extended struggle for equal rights and bodily autonomy for women in America, a struggle that continues to play out in the courtrooms and legislatures of the states.

God is not a neutral actor in the minor and major struggles of our lives. Neutrality can appear to be an attractive option, but neutrality is most often just a fancy word to cover up our selfishness.

Let's recall that, in 1938, the German government began sending thousands of Jews to concentration camps. The official response of the United States was a policy of neutrality. In 1939, German forces invaded and controlled Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. Polls taken at the time showed that most Americans wanted the United States to remain neutral. In 1940, German forces invaded and controlled Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. That same year, the German air force dropped more than 20,000 tons of bombs on civilians in England. Though President Roosevelt encouraged Congress to enter the war on the side of the allies, the people of the United States favored neutrality.

Neutrality is most often just a fancy word to cover up our selfishness. God has a straightforward intention for the people of the world: more love. And so God is not a neutral actor in the minor and major struggles of our lives. In the struggles of our lives, we do not presume that God is on our side of the struggle. In a spirit of humility espoused by Abraham Lincoln, I would say that our great concern is to try to be on God's side of the struggle.

It has been one year since Russian forces began bombing the cities of Ukraine and torturing and killing the citizens of Ukraine. Russia's war against Ukraine shows that there is no actual 'neutral' position. Nations who claim to be neutral in this conflict are sending billions of rubles to Russia each month in exchange for oil and natural gas purchased at deeply discounted rates. Those who claim to be neutral are in fact paying for the bombs and bullets that are killing, maiming, and terrorizing the women, men, and children of Ukraine.

Let's consider that if the President of the United States had not rallied the free, democratic nations of the world to support Ukraine, Ukraine would no longer exist as a free, sovereign democracy. We must make a decision about which side in the conflict is promoting God's intention, which is more love for all people. The decision we make, and the decision we support for the next two or five or ten years, has life and death consequences for the people of Ukraine.

Our decision comes down to a basic question: which voices are telling the truth? The leader of Russia says that the people of the United States and other democratic nations are weak and selfish, and will oppose intervention in the war when the price of gas reaches \$5 per gallon. The leader of Russia tells us that his nation is under threat from the Western, democratic alliance. The leader of Russia says that the leaders of Ukraine are Nazis. Do you agree with him? Plenty of Americans are big fans of the leader of Russia. One of our former presidents described Russia's invasion of Ukraine as 'genius' and as 'smart'. The former president of the United States described the invasion of Ukraine as 'wonderful'.

The people of Ukraine have a different view of their situation. The people of Ukraine tell us that more than 20,000 of their children, parents, sisters and brothers have been killed by Russian forces. They tell us that Russian bombs have destroyed their hospitals, schools, churches, apartment buildings and kindergartens. They tell us that Russian forces have taken more than 14,000 of their children away from them, and put them in orphanages in Russia. The people of Ukraine tell us that they are not Nazis and that their president is, in fact, Jewish.

The people of Ukraine are saying they have not given up hope. More than 100,000 marriages were held in Ukraine during the first six months of 2022, more than any time in recent memory. 95% of Ukrainians are convinced that their nation will prevail in their war with Russia. The people of Ukraine are saying thank you to the people of the United States for supporting them as they fight to defend their country. They say that, without the support of the United States, their nation would no longer exist.

Which of these people are telling the truth? Either the leader of Russia is telling the truth or the people of Ukraine are telling the truth about the war. You and I must decide and then act accordingly. Neutrality is not an option.

None of us likes the thought of building more ammunition to stop the advance of an invading army. Each of us would be very glad if this war ended today. This war will last as long as the leader of Russia wants it to last. Remember that the leader of Russia first sent his armed forces into the eastern and southern provinces of Ukraine in 2014. The leader of Russia is expecting that you and I just don't care that much, just like people in the United States did not really care when he sent his armed forces into the sovereign nation of Georgia. The leader of Russia is expecting that you and I will grow weary and give up. Don't give up.

This is not just a practical challenge; it is a spiritual challenge. Christ bids us to care for those who are victims and for those who are vulnerable to the aggressions of others. Your decisions about the war in Ukraine will be based on learning and telling the truth.

This is the point of today's Gospel passage. *After Jesus was baptized, he was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.* The three temptations are all based on falsehoods. The devil actually twists the words of scripture in an attempt to use them against the Son of God.

When I was young I thought this story sounded more like a legend than like real life. Yet we have heard many people twist the words of scripture in an attempt to use them against God's people. We have heard many people twist the story of history in an attempt to justify their selfishness and aggression. In the most important ways, this story is 100% real life.

The story of the temptation of Jesus points to a simple, everyday idea. Knowing and telling the truth is the foundation for everything else we do. Knowing and telling the truth is the foundation, especially for those who seek to love.

If we seek to follow Jesus' example of love, we must learn and tell the truth. We must determine which side in the struggle best represents God's intention of bringing more love into the world. Then we must show we care by committing ourselves to the struggle.