

Last Epiphany C 2022 Sermon

Luke 9:28-36

Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"--not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

I don't remember many things from my early childhood. The things I *do* remember tend to be experiences that were, in some way, traumatic.

This past week, memories surfaced from my childhood that left me feeling disoriented, un-moored, and helpless. The memories were sparked by Vladimir Putin sending Russian tanks, warplanes, and soldiers to attack and invade the sovereign European nation of Ukraine. Putin warned other countries that any attempt to interfere would lead to "consequences you have never seen." Just this morning, Mr. Putin put his nuclear forces on higher alert.

And, suddenly, I am back in my childhood, remembering my parents discussing whether or not they should build a bomb shelter in the back yard of our home, as some of our neighbors had already done. Remembering the drills we practiced in my elementary school: taking shelter in the basement hallway of the school, or ducking underneath our desk to protect us from the devastating effects of a possible nuclear attack from Nikita Khrushchev and the USSR. Remembering walking the streets of my hometown and seeing signs on buildings: the yellow and black signs with the radiation warning symbol, and, underneath, the words in large capital letters: "FALLOUT SHELTER."

Certainly, this could not be happening again, in the year 2022, when we have progressed far beyond the naked aggression of one European nation invading another? It's simply unthinkable. And yet, it is happening. Journalists are saying that the world is entering another Cold War. It's not Khrushchev and his USSR, but it's their offspring: Putin and Russia. *Déjà vu* all over again. In Europe's largest land conflict since WWII, there have already been 198 Ukrainians killed, including 3 children. An additional 1,115 Ukrainian citizens have been injured, 33 of them children.¹

On Friday, veteran journalist Thomas Friedman wrote, “I am reminded these days of what a different warped leader who decided to devour his neighbors in Europe observed. His name was Adolf Hitler, and he said: ‘The beginning of every war is like opening the door into a dark room. One never knows what is hidden in the darkness.’”²

One never knows what is hidden in the darkness. So, how do we *respond* to the darkness we do not know?

It would be easy for us to get drawn into the trap of responding to this war in Ukraine by wanting to get revenge against Mr. Putin and Russia, or using the war as a political football to lay blame on President Biden or former President Trump. And it would be easy for us to get drawn into the trap of seeing the ultimate answer to this war “out there,” where we can treat it like a chess game, trying to defeat our opponent by making the right series of retributive moves on the chessboard.

But this war isn’t a chess game that we watch from afar; and the answer to this war, ultimately, is NOT “out there.” It is in here: in the hearts and souls of human beings who choose to either live in, and act from, the kingdom of this world, or live in, and act from, the kingdom of God within.

Today’s Gospel begins with Jesus praying; and while he is praying, he is transfigured: the appearance of his face changes, and his clothes become dazzling white. John Shea writes: “[Jesus’] prayer takes place in the interior of his being. Jesus is connected to God in the deepest part of himself... [The Holy Spirit] permeates Jesus entirely. It radiates in his face and turns his clothes dazzlingly white... However, clothes symbolize more than just garments, outerwear. They [symbolize] the whole outer world, the arena of engagement and action. What begins in the interior of Jesus flows out into the world... It flows from the inner to the outer.”³ And, my friends, our response to the present war in Ukraine must, likewise, flow from the inner to the outer: from the Kingdom of God within, the radiant light within us, out into the darkness of this world and its kingdoms.

It would be easy for us to think that what is important about today’s Gospel story is only the blinding light emanating from Jesus. That, after all, is what Peter thinks it’s all about, and he wants to preserve that moment by building tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. But Peter fails to **listen** to what it is that Jesus, Moses, and Elijah are talking about: They are talking about his “departure” – the word is actually “exodus” – which Jesus is about to accomplish in Jerusalem. The purpose of Jesus going up the mountain to pray was to be strengthened for the mission that lies ahead, which will end in Jerusalem with his betrayal, abandonment, crucifixion, and resurrection.

John Shea puts it this way: “Prayer on the mountain is the preparation for action on the earth.”⁴ Peter is not listening to what Jesus, Moses, and Elijah are saying;

and yet, this is the take-away at the end of today's Gospel: the disciples are told by God to **listen** to Jesus. The voice coming from the cloud says to Peter, James, and John, "This is my beloved Son. **Listen** to him." *Listen* to him.

Now, if you remember, in *last* Sunday's Gospel, Jesus told his followers, "I say to you that *listen*, Love your enemies..." (Luke 6:27) I say to you that **listen**, Love your enemies. Jesus knows that only those who **listen** to him from deep within their heart and soul will be able to truly hear that difficult teaching, "Love your enemies." So, the question for **us** is, "Are *we* among those that listen? Can **we** love our enemies?"

Can we love Mr. Putin, while condemning the *actions* he has taken, and working to stop those actions? As you have heard me say before, *where we are coming from* makes all the difference. If we are coming from a vengeful, punitive heart and mindset, then whatever action we decide to take against Russia or Mr. Putin himself will ultimately harm our own heart and soul, as well as the heart and soul of our nation and the global community. But if we have **listened** to Jesus, and *heard* him commanding us to love our enemies; if we are coming from a loving heart and mindset, with the intention of stopping the killing and destruction and the efforts to topple the Ukrainian government rather than taking revenge on Mr. Putin, then the actions we take will ultimately result in a much greater chance for long-term peace in the world.

Bible scholars are not sure, but it is possible that the disciple John who witnesses Jesus' radiating transfiguration in today's Gospel is the same John who wrote the Gospel of John. And, in the prologue to John's Gospel, we read: "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was... in the world... yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him... he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:9-13) For all of **us** who receive him – who truly **listen** to him who commands us to love our enemies – to all of us who listen in the depths of our being, he gives power to become children of God, born not of the will of man, but of the will of God. Ruled not by a human mindset and ego, with its desire for revenge and retribution, but by the mind of Christ, who, from the cross, prayed for those who crucified him, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)

AMEN

- 1 (<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/article258819393.html#storylink=cpy>)
- 2 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/25/opinion/putin-russia-ukraine.html>)
- 3 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, pp. 70-71
- 4 Shea, *ibid.*, p. 71