

STAND AND DELIVER

Psalm 27 / Phil. 3:17-4:1

I grew up during the Cold War. At that time, there were only two superpowers in the world: the United States and the U.S.S.R. Both countries were engaged in a vigorous arms race, producing enough nuclear weapons as to assure their mutual destruction should one nation develop an itchy trigger finger. I remember seeing protesters in the streets when cruise missiles were pointed at Moscow which was, as the crow flies, only about 1,300 miles away from Nürnberg, my home town. And I remember crossing a five-mile militarized zone fortified with barbed wire, landmines and tanks when I laced up my boots to play soccer in Soviet-occupied Prague about 40 years ago. Scary stuff.

Never in my lifetime did I imagine that the Western world would find itself in a situation again where a nuclear war could become a possibility, albeit a faint one. But here we are with Russia invading Ukraine, a sovereign nation, putting the entire world on edge.

I can easily imagine the Ukrainians praying with the Psalmist: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—my adversaries and foes—they shall stumble and fall. Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.”

When I left the Nürnberg train station early last Monday morning to return to St. Louis, I walked by kiosks welcoming Ukrainian refugees with food, clothing and shelter. My heart sank because I could go to my safe home while countless children and women could not. From one day to the next, they lost everything they held dear. With images in my head of exhausted and haggard refugees arriving in Poland and those remaining in Ukraine cowering by the thousands in abandoned subway tunnels, the Psalmists words echoed in my ears: “Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!” Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me.”

The Psalmist’s existential threat thousands of years ago was not any different than the existential threat of the Ukrainians right now. When the

Psalmist talks about enemies, they are not mere metaphorical figments of a religious imagination. When she speaks of war and armies surrounding her and her people, she describes a grim reality. The apostle Paul can also relate to the Psalmist's situation. He and the early Christian community lived under constant existential threat: "For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things."

The U.S. has known and suffered the trauma of war in this land, be it the Civil War, Pearl Harbor, 9/11. And sadly, many of us have personal experience with war either by having served, or our loved ones or family members having served overseas in wars around the globe to help bring peace in this world. But how can we relate to the current situation? We are thousands of miles away from the conflict in Ukraine and we are geographically separated by an ocean. Images on television broadcasts or the internet simply cannot do this tragedy justice. None of us, thank God, has ever experienced entire cities on US soil laid waste, had to dodge incoming mortar fire or had to hide from enemy tanks and falling bombs. And I pray we'll never have to experience such a thing. Nor can we truly relate to the apostle Paul and the early church, because we as a church

are currently not under any kind of existential threat. We are not being actively persecuted nor are we subject to physical violence because of our faith.

Nevertheless, you and I are old enough and have lived long enough to know what it means to encounter existential threats. Real ones, not imaginary ones. Existential threats that call our lives into question from one moment to the next and change our lives forever. They teach us that ultimately we do not have much control over anything. We have been dislodged by a world-wide pandemic—now entering its third year. Perhaps we received a medical diagnosis which reminds us of our mortality. Perhaps we lost a loved one. Maybe our livelihood has been shaken.

And all of a sudden we find ourselves on our knees as we lift our voices together with the Psalmist, the apostle Paul, the people of Ukraine, and, yes, many people in Russia: “For God will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock. Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord.”

That is where we are, right here and right now. In God's tent which we call *Ladue Chapel*. Here God conceals us under God's cover and sets us higher than all our troubles. Here we can lift up our heads above anything and everything that assails us as we offer our sacrifices, each of us in our own way, with shouts of joy. Here we sing and make melody to the Lord.

The Barmen Declaration, which is the basis of our *Affirmation of Faith* today, was written in 1934 by members of the *Confessing Church* as the Nazi regime attempted to take over the church, forcing each member to pledge allegiance to Adolf Hitler. When the enemies surrounded them and war rose up against them, they penned these words in response: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death."

Our faith is not for the faint of heart. It is real faith by real people in real time under real circumstances. Yet, while this is always true, our faith also points beyond our existential predicaments. While we serve a God who is fully human as we are, we also serve a God who is fully divine. This is why the apostle Paul can say to those being persecuted in real time: "But our citizenship is in heaven. ... Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love

and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.”

As we stand firm, then, in the Lord, God will deliver us. To which we affirm in the words of the Psalmist: “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!” This is how the Psalmist ends his prayer and plea. Right now, it is a faint hope for too many people in this world. Nevertheless, it is a hope grounded in the living God who sustains us during all our trials and tribulations.

May it be so, for you, and for me. Amen.

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3rd Sunday of Lent, March 13, 2022