

We are now on route to Easter, remembering the 40 days that Jesus spent in the desert without food or shelter, where it is recorded that Jesus was tempted by the Devil. Whether you think that the Devil is a personal being, or the name given to the forces of evil in this world, it is clear to us that evil is real and active in the world, then and now. Right now, many see evil personified in Vladimir Putin, as some 80 years ago people were seeing evil incarnate in Adolf Hitler. The temptations of Jesus in the desert are very pertinent to the evil we are now seeing.

Three temptations are listed in the gospel accounts; I skipped over the first one about turning stones into bread; we know that Jesus chose to remain hungry, to continue fasting, telling off the devil by quoting the scripture: “Man does not live by bread alone!” I’ll move right on to the 2nd and 3rd temptations however, since they are most relevant to our current situation.

The second temptation is clearly about power, particularly the misuse of power ... to dominate, to have power “over” others, to be an autocrat, to rule all the kingdoms or nations of the world. Sound familiar? Yes, people like Hitler and Putin have both fallen into this demonic temptation to be a supreme ruler, an autocrat, a dictator. Jesus responds to the devil by again quoting scripture, saying “Worship the Lord your God and serve only God!” To claim supreme authority and power for oneself is to push all others aside, even God. The ten commandments are clear: “Thou shall have no other gods before me.” God in the Bible opposed pharaohs, kings, and emperors..... since they were usually oppressing or enslaving someone else! God said to Pharaoh through Moses, “Let my people go free!” The prophets attacked evil kings for oppressing widows and the poor, And Jesus was clear that his mission was to set captives free, to set at liberty all who are oppressed!

And thank goodness, most of the world is currently on the same page: seeing Ukraine as the oppressed, as the victims. Thank goodness that European allies are mostly in agreement to help Ukrainians resist an oppressive invasion. Thank goodness that even a principal bank in Beijing China has reportedly cut off funds to Russia. Most surrounding countries are seeing the murderous autocratic actions of Putin as demonic, though he lies to his own people that he is helping oppressed separatist Ukrainians. Thank goodness that many Russians are seeing the truth and are brave enough to protest. We know from this temptation that Jesus is against putting all authority in one person, a kind of rule that can easily turn demonic. Jesus refused absolute power for himself, saying that God alone was to be worshipped and served as the highest power. To quote a modern proverb: “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

I believe that the uniting of so many nations against Putin’s tyrannical moves is an example of the power of many... many who serve a God of basic simple commands - to love neighbor, and to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. All who are currently allies against Putin and his war, are on the same page following common spiritual values - to love neighbor, to preserve life and to stand against destruction and killing.

The 3rd temptation we could say is about safety and security... specifically the temptation of asking God for absolute safety and no suffering. The Devil is reported as quoting Psalm 91 where the poet insists that God will protect us with angels that will keep us so safe that we will never stub a toe on a stone! I’m sure angels can indeed help guide us and keep us acting as safely as possible, but complete safety from even scraping our foot on a stone? I think not. This is a great example of not taking every word

of the Bible literally, especially the Psalms that are a form of poetry! I remember my mother telling how on a cruise with my father in Alaska, they got off in some city and she immediately tripped on some bricks and landed on her face. Needless to say, her face was black and blue for about a month! We are NOT protected from all the dangers and risks and evils of this world, nor are we protected from all illness, as we know too well these days.

So Jesus had a strong reply to the Devil regarding perfect safety, quoting Scriptures again, saying “Do not put the Lord your God to the test!” In other words, don’t put God on trial... just because the Psalm says angels will protect even your feet from scraping on stones, don’t take that absolutely literally. Jesus says: don’t ask me to jump off the top of the temple to prove that God will come through for me with a safety net of angels! Jesus knew that he must suffer many things. We remember that when Jesus told his disciples that he must suffer, and Peter asked him to stop talking like that, Jesus said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan.” In other words, Peter, don’t *you* be thinking that being close to God means never hitting one’s foot against a stone! We still must go through trials and scrapes and suffering in this life, like the rest of God’s children. In fact, following me will involve carrying your own cross, even being persecuted like the prophets.

This third temptation to perfect safety and comfort is so relevant to our world situation. Following Jesus involves some suffering and sacrifice! Why are so many complaining about price increases at the gas pump? If we are to help Ukraine stand up against a bully, a ruthless murderer, we will pay *some* price! If we attack the energy sector to put a squeeze on Russia, are we willing to pay a price... of costlier automobile travel, and heating oil etc? To help the Ukrainian people, that is the very least we can do:

accept higher prices of oil and gas, sacrifice a little: travel less, keep our homes at cooler temperatures, etc!

Of course there is the power of prayer. There have been many vigils; just yesterday there was a worldwide prayer and meditation at noon for peace, by a group called unify.org. They also shared photos of all the love and support at the Polish border. That spirit can spread person to person. Surely prayer changes minds and hearts. Of course money that can also be sent through trustworthy channels of our choice (see the bulletin for our national UCC church efforts). As Martin Luther King said, “Those who love peace must organize and act, as effectively as those who love war.” So let us act, in any way we can, to stop Putin’s war, and help all refugees. We are praying and acting to stop unquestionable evil.

Listen to the lyrics of a most appropriate song... by the famous Reformer, Martin Luther. *“A might fortress is our God For still our ancient foe, doth seek to work us woe; his craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate, on earth is not his equal....(but)... We will not fear, for God has willed his truth to triumph through us. The prince of darkness grim, We tremble not for him; His rage we can endure, For lo, his doom is sure: One little word shall fell him.”* ...The power of the word of God, the power of the incarnate Word who is Jesus himself, The power of a well chosen word of truth. For Putin and all autocrats and dictators, we heard a word of power from Jesus this morning: “Worship the Lord thy God, and serve only God.” And this God wants to topple brutal dictators and destroyers of life; This God, in all religions, is One who ultimately cares for life, humans and creatures. We have to keep faith in the power of God’s ways, as stronger than evil, as redemptive love and justice, and ultimately as peace on earth. Amen.