

The news is not good. Things are getting worse in Ukraine. People are dying, people are getting injured, and there seems no way out. This is the reality we live with, as well as the smaller dramas and concerns of our own lives. It can seem overwhelming.

In the first reading this morning, Abram was in a funk. He was afraid that he would die childless. People of those times thought that their immortality was in their descendants – to die without children was to be cut off, to die completely without trace. So Abram was afraid of dying, and he was afraid that he could not trust God’s promises which seemed impossible.

In the gospel reading, some Pharisees tried to frighten Jesus with a warning that Herod is after him. This is probably not new news. Herod is the one who beheaded John the Baptist – it makes sense that Herod is also against Jesus, and indeed he is involved when Jesus is taken to Pilate. But Jesus does not flinch. He simply tells them to let Herod know that it is not the time.

It was not the time for Abram to see his descendants, it was not the time for Jesus to end his ministry. Apparently, today is not the time for the war to end.

How are we to understand this? How can God allow this to continue? And what are we to do?

Jesus told his disciples “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.” (Matt 24:6). See that you are not alarmed. What is the first thing that God said to Abram? “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield.” And what is the first thing Jesus says in all his post-resurrection appearances? “Peace be with you.”

There is a theme here. In times of threat and danger, we are to be unafraid and at peace.

We can be sure that God is present and God is at work even when it is difficult to see. It helps, I think, to change our perspective and see God as present within the difficulties and the war, rather than at a distance watching and directing from a heavenly throne. Starting from the view that God is present *within* the situation, we can see that God is always working to create the best possible outcomes for the thriving of all creation. But we also have free will, and it is up to us to choose the best possible outcomes.

We don't always do that, and neither do other people.

And because God respects our free will, God doesn't descend from a cloud and sort things out. God continues to open new possibilities that can lead to the best possible outcomes given the mess of the moment. And we can participate in that.

Abram prayed and he believed in God's answer. His belief, his faithfulness, reconciled him to God: and the rest of the story is about God making a covenant with him in the fashion of the day which included a bunch of dead animals.

We get to skip the dead animals, but we still get to have deep and personal conversations with God, we still get to believe that God is faithful, we still get to be reconciled with Godself. In our prayer we participate in the work of God. Because we are all inter-connected, God can use our prayer to help bring about those best possible outcomes.

Theologian Marjorie Suchocki whose ideas on prayer we are discussing on Tuesday mornings says that not only does our prayer change things, but that we have a responsibility to pray. That's a challenging idea for me. I was brought up with responsibility as a high value. Tell me I have a responsibility to do something and I take it seriously. No-one has ever before told me that I have a responsibility to pray.

But I get it.

If our prayer helps God to offer and to bring about the best possible outcomes, then my friends, we need to be praying. We need to be praying for the people of Ukraine and Russia, Hungary and Belarus; we need to be praying for President Putin, President Biden and the leaders of the world. We need to be praying for a lasting peace and an end to oppression. Prayer is not a last resort but our gift to the world, and yes, our *responsibility* as citizens of both worlds.

We need not pray from a place of fear but a place of confidence, confident that God is working for the greatest flourishing of all beings.

Jesus described Herod as a fox, and himself as a hen. I am sure that the fox prowling around the henhouse was an image as well known then as now. Jesus longed to gather the people of Jerusalem under his wings like a hen protects her young. We don't usually think of God as a chicken, but it is a beautiful image of protection.

And it is from the safety of God's protective wings that we are able to pray. As the psalmist said,

Should war rage against me, even then will I trust.  
One thing I ask the Lord, one thing I seek:  
To dwell in the house of God every day of my life,  
Caught up in God's beauty, at prayer in God's temple.  
The Lord will hide me there, hide my life from attack:  
A sheltering tent above me, a firm rock below.

My friends, whatever happens we are safe in the love of God.

We do not need to be caught up in anxiety about the war in Ukraine or about anything else. Sometimes I think we confuse the serenity that comes from trust in God with a lack of caring. It is ok for us not be worrying about the war. It is actually totally ok for us not to be worrying about anything. Because Jesus tells us not to worry, "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed" he said.

And Jesus models serenity in the face of danger. “Be worried, be very worried”, warned the Pharisees, “Herod is out to get you!” And Jesus carried on with his ministry, “Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow,” he said. He acknowledged that there was danger ahead. Like Martin Luther King in Memphis, he had been to the mountaintop, and was aware of the dangers ahead of him. Jesus knew what is coming in its own good time and yet he serenely carried on doing what God had given him to do today.

We have Jesus’ example, we have Jesus’ words. Let us like Abram believe in the promises of God, and let us with the psalmist seek the face of God and be faithful in prayer for our world.

Let us now pray together for ourselves:

Lord grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change  
The courage to change the things we can  
And the wisdom to know the difference. Amen