

The Church of the Transfiguration
The Last Sunday After the Epiphany
Luke 9:28-36

Our Lady of Kyiv

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The great 20th century theologian Karl Barth once said that a minister should always preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Well, there's been a lot happening on the newspaper side of things this week. I was – and remain – shocked by the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. I suspect that you were too.

Taking my direction from Karl Barth, I'd like to reflect this morning on the news from the perspective of today's gospel reading.

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Shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine on Thursday, an image of Our Lady of Kyiv, a twelfth-century Eastern Orthodox icon, began circulating on social media along with prayers for the Ukrainian people.

Perhaps you've seen the icon on Facebook or Twitter. It's a beautiful image. It shows the Virgin Mary tenderly holding the Christ child with her cheek pressed against the baby. This icon has been described as a "treasure of the Ukrainian cultural heritage."

By now, we all know about the political tension that has existed between Russia and Ukraine during the past few decades. But did you know about the ongoing religious tension between the two countries? There are actually two competing Eastern Orthodox denominations in Ukraine – one of which is recognized by the Russian Orthodox Church, and another that isn't.

Almost exactly a week ago, Vladimir Putin released a statement saying that the denomination that was recognized by the Russian Orthodox Church was being persecuted by the Ukrainian government.

"Violence against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is still being [perpetuated] by Kiev," Putin said. He accused the Ukrainian government of "cynically transform[ing] the tragedy of the church schism into an instrument of state policy." Putin further accused the Ukrainian government of proposing new laws that are directed against the denomination's clergy and "millions of parishioners."

Looking back on this statement, it seems fairly obvious that the Russian leader was simply creating a theological excuse to justify going to war with Ukraine. That is, Russia had no

choice but to invade the country because Russia's sister church denomination needed to be "rescued."

Just two days ago, however, the very denomination that Putin was allegedly trying to "rescue" rejected his claims and asked him to immediately stop this "fratricidal war." In fact, the denomination went even further. It said that the war between these two countries was "a repeat of the sin of Cain, who out of envy killed his natural brother." The denomination concluded by saying that "[s]uch a war has no justification either with God or with people."

Despite the Russian dictator's attempt to use the church as an excuse to justify his war against Ukraine, the Eastern Orthodox denomination in that country refused to play along. Instead, the denomination spoke the truth and looked only to God as the sole means of revelation – not world events, not history, not politics, and certainly not Putin.

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Today is the Last Sunday After the Epiphany. It is the final Sunday before the season of Lent begins on Wednesday. Our gospel reading is the story of the Transfiguration – the mountaintop experience for which our parish is named.

For most of us, the Transfiguration is a familiar story. In fact, you can see images of the event all around us – above the high altar and in the stained glass windows of the mortuary chapel. Jesus took his disciples Peter, James, and John up a mountain to pray. While they were there, Jesus was transfigured. The appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. The three disciples saw the light of Jesus' glory and also observed him talking to Moses and Elijah. The disciples were then overshadowed by a cloud, and they heard a voice saying "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

Peter was so moved by the experience that he wanted to stay on the mountain and build three shrines there – one dwelling each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. But the disciples, including Peter, needed to come down from their mountaintop experience. And so they descended the mountain the next day, keeping silent about what they had seen.

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Now the Transfiguration is not just an important event for our parish, or The Episcopal Church, or even Western Christendom. The Transfiguration is also one of the great twelve feasts of the Eastern Orthodox Church. In Eastern Orthodoxy, the Transfiguration is theologically significant because it reveals to us the full divinity of Jesus Christ. According to traditional Christian doctrine, Jesus Christ not only became fully human because of the Incarnation, but he was also fully divine as the Word made flesh.

As we heard in today's reading from the Gospel According to St. Luke, the full divinity of Jesus Christ was revealed to Peter, James, and John during the Transfiguration. By the power of the Holy Spirit, their eyes were opened to see the divine light that shone forth from Jesus Christ's face and clothing.

Like the three apostles, we too are called to see the full divinity of Jesus Christ with our very own eyes. The Transfiguration reminds us that, for Christians, God is most fully revealed in Jesus Christ.

In today's lectionary readings, we hear about Moses, who represents the Law. We also hear about Elijah, who represents the Prophets. But only Jesus Christ is the very Word of God.

As such, we are ultimately called to follow Jesus Christ in all matters theological – not world events, not history, and not politics.

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But there's more. Eastern Orthodoxy also sees the Transfiguration as a foreshadowing of our own transfiguration and growth into the image and likeness of God. The Eastern Orthodox have a word for this: *theosis*, in the Greek, which means "becoming like God."

It makes a lot of sense, then, that we traditionally hear about the story of the Transfiguration on the Last Sunday After the Epiphany in the Episcopal Church. Why? Because, as I mentioned, the season of Lent will begin in just three days.

The Book of Common Prayer encourages us to take on a spiritual practice during the season of Lent that will help us to grow more fully into the image and likeness of God. As the Ash Wednesday liturgy says, we are invited to observe a "holy Lent" by "self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word."

So I invite you to think of this coming Lent as a time of spiritual training. Not just a time for giving up things, but rather a time for taking on something that will help you to grow spiritually. Specifically, I invite you to discern how you might be transfigured – through *theosis* or divinization – in a way that brings you closer to the image and likeness of God.

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As the course of the war between Russia and Ukraine unfolds in the coming days and beyond, I invite you to reflect upon the Transfiguration and our understanding that the divine light of God is most fully revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

Yes, it is a scary and uncertain time. And things may get a lot worse. But if we are to learn anything from the story of the Transfiguration, it is that each of us is called – like Peter, James, and John – to open our eyes and to see the divine light of God in Jesus Christ. It is only in Jesus Christ that we should put our trust. And, in so doing, we are called to transfigure ourselves into the image and likeness of God.

Before we end, I'd like to invite you to join with me in reading "A Prayer for Ukraine" on the back of our bulletin:

*God of peace and justice,
we pray for the people of Ukraine today.
We pray for peace and the laying down of weapons.
We pray for all those who fear for tomorrow,
that your Spirit of comfort would draw near to them.
We pray for those with power over war or peace,
for wisdom, discernment and compassion
to guide their decisions.
Above all, we pray for all your precious children, at-risk and in fear,
that you would hold and protect them.
We pray in the name of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.
Amen.*

*- Archbishop Justin Welby
- Archbishop Stephen Cottrell*

May the Holy Spirit open our eyes through God's grace and through the love of Jesus Christ. And may Our Lady of Kyiv pray for her beloved children in the Ukraine during this difficult time.