

Sermon

Preacher | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

The Gospel | Matthew 6:1–6,16–21

Date | March 2, 2022, Ash Wednesday



**ALL
SAINTS'**
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

'Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains
a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
nor will be again after them
in ages to come.'

As I hear those words from the prophet Joel, set aside for the church to read on this Ash Wednesday, I cannot help but think of Ukraine. For surely they know more than most this day what it feels like for a 'blackness to spread' upon the mountains, the sense of dread that accompanies the news that a 'great and powerful army comes'. 'Blow the trumpet' in Kyiv, 'sound the alarm' in Mariupol, 'Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble'.

I saw an image today of an orthodox priest in Ukraine celebrating communion in an underground parking lot. He stood behind the altar his head bowed touching the concrete ceiling as if carrying the weight of sadness around him. The people gathered by the makeshift altar had their eyes closed, and prayed with their hands over their mouths. Everything around him was grey and dark, except for the priest who stood there in bright vestments. The friend of mine who posted the picture commented that this was why traditions such as the orthodox and our own have priests dress in lavish clothing, not to promote the piety of the wearer - as Matthew's gospel would be quick to condemn - but as my friend noted, 'for the times when they're brought out, into the bunkers, the ICUs, the protest marches, the homeless encampments', for when your people are living in a time of gathering darkness.

The image had a powerful effect on me. All at once it put our Lenten decisions to give up chocolate, or dessert, or meat into a more pressing perspective. Perhaps such practices help us feel better about ourselves, maybe we'll even lose some of those Covid pounds, but at a time such as this, surely we have to ask how our faith might place us, like the priest in the concrete bunker parking lot, where the darkness falls most thick.

Of course, most of us would rather avoid the darkness if we can. Some of us might fear that if we spend too long lingering in despairing places, then we might slip into despair ourselves. Others just find the pain and suffering of others too uncomfortable to stay with. Yet for those who attended David Pacini and Sarah Stewart's outstanding class this past Sunday afternoon, staying with the suffering of others was exactly the invitation offered, an invitation that I would like to describe to you this evening as the practice of loitering with holy intent.

Some of my best loitering has been spent in hospital. Hospital chaplains do a lot of loitering. Waiting rooms. Hallways. Around the edges of hospital rooms. Sometimes at nurses stations, waiting on a moment of honesty to emerge from an overburdened case manager or nurse who hitherto had been valiantly holding it all in. Loitering is 95% of the job. A chaplain who looks overly productive probably didn't read their job description carefully enough. That might as well be taken straight from the Book of Common Prayer's beautiful Compline service. It is to 'keep watch...with those who work, or watch, or weep this night'. It is to ask God to 'give the angels charge over those who sleep'...to 'tend the sick...give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, and shield the joyous'. In other words, it is to get still enough with a bruised and breaking heart that you can hear its rhythm, learn to follow the rise and fall of the chest, and feel for yourself what it is like to linger in dark places.

Perhaps there's an invitation in there for you to hear, especially if you also have found the people of Ukraine weighing heavily on your heart. Consider this Lent taking up the practice of holy loitering, of offering your company to someone who is in a dry valley. Give up chocolate if you must, but take up solidarity, in-person, over the phone, or even online. For when we choose to stay, when we summon the strength to linger in the dark with people, we get to see one another more honestly. We learn to give and receive our fragility as well as our strength. We start to fashion a shared space of belonging, a place for relationship to grow that is honest enough for us to receive one another.

I suspect that you may well know this sort of solidarity for yourself already. The parent you nursed to the end of their lives. The friend whom you kept on showing up for when they lost a child, or a spouse, or just their hope. The decision you made to stay in the conversation that was hurtful and the relationship that was fraught. These are the holy practices of accompaniment that make our faith worth counting on. These are the marks of faithfulness in the lives of another that allow them

to see who we really are to them, and them to us. They are expressions of Christian living punctuated with honest vulnerability, a truth that has a power all of its own, the capacity to help us find one another, just when we need to be found.

Last week we welcomed to Atlanta church leaders from around the country for a conference that culminated in a joyous worship service here at All Saints'. Some of you might have been there. The lead singer that night, Imani-Grace Cooper, has a voice that is best described as beguiling. It was one of the most remarkable worship experiences I have ever had, not because of its excellence, but because of the unleashing of the heart that it created space for. I made sure to thank Imani and told her that her ministry of music had been a gift to those church leaders in ways she simply could not have known ahead of time.

All week at the conference I heard people describe the extraordinary weight that church leadership had been upon them these past two years. I could see it on people's faces. We were encouraged when people asked us how we are doing, not to say 'fine', 'well', 'good' - the usual pack of lies clergy offer to one another about their well-being in public - but instead to say how we really are. 'Tired', 'spent', 'out of gas'. And we did. We named our fragility. And what a gift that was. As the music soared on Friday night, and the preaching inspired, and as this church was filled with the sound of the people of God singing with hearts filled with the gladness of one another's company after such a long, dry journey in the wilderness, we uncovered something we had needed to see for so very long: that we are not alone. That there are others who wait and watch with us. At last, we had learned to loiter with one another, with holy intent in our hearts.

We are far from knowing how the terrible events that are unfolding in Ukraine will end. Yet we do know that we have before us a span of time, set aside by the church, one that gifts us with an opportunity to practice the art of solidarity, to offer to the world in this heartbreaking time an image of what faithfulness to one another looks like. I invite you into such a faithfulness this Lent, to practice the art of loitering with holy intent in one another's lives, holding onto the hope that all of us are promised, that tells us: 'Do not be afraid for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine'. Amen. ✝

