

## **LETTING GO OF THE FUNDAMENTALIST IMPULSE**

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Feb. 27, 2022*

*based on Luke 9:28-36*

Well, I wrote two sermons this week based on today's Transfiguration text. The first was entitled, *Thin Places*. You know the term? The Irish love to speak of certain special locations as "thin places" where the common world and the world beyond seem to come together. It's a fun sermon; kind of light, full of reflection on wonder and mystery like the Transfiguration of Jesus itself. But as events in Ukraine unfolded this week the sermon just seemed to me to be more and more out of step with the moment.

On Friday I thought maybe it would be a good distraction, but the last couple of days my heart and head have been focused on the heroic people of Ukraine – so much so that I woke up yesterday morning and spent the day putting together something else entirely but still using the text set for today. So, here goes ...

According to Luke's version of the Transfiguration story, several clouds were hanging low over Jesus at the time. The Pharisees and Sadducees were making every day difficult for him now. That wasn't the worst of it. The crowds around him were growing, and they were growing more and more demanding. To top things off, his disciples were bickering continually. Talk about having a bad week.

So, Jesus decided it was time to do something different. He probably knew the fact that if you have a stubborn problem and you try the same old thing over and over and find you are merely spinning your wheels it's best to stop. Best to pause for a moment and try something new.

So, instead of dealing directly with their rivalry and complaints, Jesus began to talk to the disciples about what he saw coming down the road toward him -- a big M-1 tank with his name on a shell inside it. He talked to them about three things: suffering, Jerusalem, and the cross. He talked about how sometimes you need to save your own life by giving it away.

As I thought a second time about this text I realized that President Volodymyr Zelensky was speaking to his people in precisely those terms on Friday. Remember? Russian media claimed that he fled Kyiv in fear -- so he went outside the Presidential Palace and videoed himself to prove otherwise. He said he knew very well that the Russians were on their way to the capitol and that he was Target #1. He said he was going nowhere.

Back to this morning's text -- while the disciples sat there dumb, staring at one another, Jesus took the three leaders of his little band away from the others. He led them up the hill, winding with switch-backs, to the top of the high place where something happened, something notable.

No faithful interpreter claims to understand the full meaning of this event, but it came to be called "the transfiguration," which means "change" or "meta- morphosis." As the gospel writers tell it, two Old Testament heavyweights magically appear -- Moses and Elijah. In tune with the holiness of the moment, Jesus' face shone like Moses's had shone on Mt. Sinai when he received the stone tablets holding the law. Jesus' friends had never seen the like of it. More, his garments glistened and it hurt their eyes.

Then, topping everything else, God spoke, saying, as God did at Jesus' baptism, "This is my beloved son . . . Do not be afraid." This encounter turned them inside out. Simon Peter wanted to stay there forever.

He said he wanted to build three booths to memorialize the moment, but Jesus just shook his shining head, because you can't preserve the holy like a taxidermist preserves a hunting trophy.

Well, you can try. Years ago, I took a confirmation class of middle-school-age kids up to a Tibetan Buddhist temple in the hills above Ashland in order to show them how one sect of Buddhism worshipped. I asked the guide there if they ever had actual Tibetan monks come to their temple to chant and create the sand paintings they are so famous for.

You know what I mean? Those beautiful paintings made with colored sand which are meant to be created in a few days and then are destroyed in a moment by the sweep of a hand to demonstrate the transitoriness of life.

Our guide said, “Yes, we have a few of those.” Anxious to please, he showed us two that he said someone in authority had given them permission to shellac so they would be forever preserved. Which of course completely destroys the meaning of the whole thing! Go figure.

Anyway, Peter’s impulse to preserve the past by building a memorial reminded me that we all of us have that impulse inside us – the desire for things to never change -- the hatred of change and with it, the hatred of progress. God’s message to Peter and his friends is, “Forget about the past. This is my beloved son – for heaven’s sake, listen to him.”

Russian President, Vladimir Putin, is in love with the past. His version of the past, that is. He says the worst thing to happen in the last 100 years was the breakup of the Soviet Union. I can’t say that I agree with him. He wants it back in some form and he appears willing to do anything to accomplish that, which is scary as hell.

Serhii Plokyh is Professor of Ukrainian History at Harvard University. Allow me to give you his take on the present events in Ukraine. He looks at the whole situation the way a historian does – from 35,000 feet.

*What we [are watching] is the process of disintegration of one of the last world empires ... The Russian Empire started to fall apart when the Austro-Hungarian, the Ottoman and other empires were falling apart. The Bolsheviks held it together, but it still fell apart in 1991, almost overnight. Everyone was surprised. It was a miracle that there was no major war or bloodshed. Now we realize that the war was just postponed.*

Get it? Professor Plokyh believes *that* war we thought we dodged is happening right now. Stuff happens in this world, but as has been said, it often takes 8 times longer to happen, or, in this case to unravel, than you can imagine.

Serhii Plokyh continues ...

*With the end of the Cold War, the Soviet Union fell apart. It was **not** a hot war, but it was a war that was lost by Moscow economically, geo-strategically etc.*

*Now there is an attempt to get the empire back together as a belt of dependencies. Russia tried through economic means, through political means, and now they're at the war stage. It's the last instrument that Russia has in its hands.*

He continues ...

*Ukraine is important because it's the second-largest post-Soviet republic. If Ukraine resists successfully, that puts in question the Russian claim for the rest of the post-Soviet space. It puts in question the attempt of Moscow to somehow recreate not the Soviet Union—no one wants that, that was an expensive imperial project—but establish an effective sphere of influence. Without the second largest part you would have a huge hole in the entire structure.*

*Putin's goal is either to make Ukraine pro-Russian or dismember it. He didn't succeed in 2014. He grabbed part of the Ukrainian territory (Crimea) but [by doing that, he] mobilized the rest [of Ukraine] against Russia. In Ukraine, the number of people who want to join NATO went up by three times. It grew closer to the West. [Since then it has been] conducting joint military exercises with NATO. It's the absolute opposite of what Putin wanted to achieve.*

So, Putin's actions are desperate and kind of insane. His annexation of Crimea led to the ousting in Ukraine of a pro-Russian leader who was replaced by, a democrat – President Zelensky – the last thing he wanted.

Calling Zelensky a “neo-Nazi” is part of Putin's insanity. But, look, like all people married to the past he is totally out of touch with the spirit of the present. He is deeply homophobic; deeply misogynistic. He hates progress of any kind, especially progress that liberates or is inclusive. For that reason he will make himself irrelevant. It's the fate of all leaders like him. Still, let's face it; one worries about what he might do if events or losses back him into a corner.

A Ukrainian woman this week said that one day Putin will disappear and there will be little trace of him, but by then there will be public squares all over Ukraine that will be named for Volodymyr Zelensky.

Funny, isn't it, that Putin's #1 fan is Donald Trump. Well, Donald Trump will be relegated to the dust bin of history, too. They can both go there together. Even Tucker Carlson seemed this week to be leaving the Putin fan club.

The idea that Putin will possibly be erased by history made me think of a sermon I delivered the week Osama bin Laden was killed by our Navy Seals in Pakistan. By the time he got the ending he deserved – not the martyr's death he wanted so desperately, but a kind of an antiseptic summary execution, he was pretty much discredited and kind of a dinosaur.

Allow me to quote from that sermon – again, it's from 2011. Its conclusions are, I think, germane today.

*I remember so well when 9-11 happened. Many people were saying, "Life will never be the same again." I decided to learn all I could about Osama bin Laden. There was a lot of information available – where he was schooled – who his religious teachers were. What his gripes with Saudi Arabia, his homeland, were. It seemed to me that at the heart of his quarrel with the west was his observation that in Europe and America, women were not possessions to be owned by men as they were in Saudi Arabia. They had been centuries before in the west, but this was changing and it sickened and scared him. He knew his own homeland might be next. Some women were even trying to get the right to drive in Saudi Arabia. Imagine that?*

*His action against the west, taking down the towers in NYC, was devastating, but ultimately not world changing in the way he hoped – they didn't put an end to the progress of feminism; they were simply an angry reaction to the inevitability of liberal progress; his was the last gasp of a medieval impulse.*

.... just as Putin's possible failure in Ukraine may be the last gasp of the Russian empire. One can hope. Back to my 2011 sermon ...

*I wonder if some of what we are facing today in this country may be similar. There are forces that want to take us backward when it comes to freedom.*

*They will not win in the end, but they will attempt to take us one hundred or two hundred years backward if they can.*

Well, that *has* been happening in this country, and January 6<sup>th</sup> was the apex of it, thus far.

Here's a bit more from that sermon ...

*I have a wonderful Christian friend who goes to a fundamentalist church. Following 9-11 her pastor announced to all, "We are living in the last days, that's the only way one can explain these events." My friend believed him completely. She said, "I just hope it will be quick."*

*We've heard this all before. Many in the 1950s thought that the free world's face-down with "godless communism" meant Armageddon -- the end of history. I remember reading a religious tract when I was a teenager claiming that the Chinese were putting nuclear weapons in space that would soon reign down a fire on the world. It was time to get right with God. J.B. Phillips wrote a book in those days for those who held such views. He called it. YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL.*

Maybe the disciples thought the same when Jesus was transfigured; that it meant the end of the world.

*Well, rather than being Armageddon, I'm thinking we are still experiencing turmoil because we are actually in the first days of a brand new era of openness and inclusivity, the like of which we have never seen before. We are in a struggle with the Muslim world, it's true, but it's nothing to the struggle Muslims are having with each other.*

*President George W. Bush took that tack when he spoke to the congress on September 13, 2001 – just two days after the attacks of 9/11. In as good a speech as I remember hearing from any president from the floor of Congress he said,*

"I . . . want to speak tonight directly to Muslims throughout the world. We respect your faith. It's practiced freely by many millions of Americans and by millions more in countries that America counts as friends. Its teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah. The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying, in effect, to hijack Islam itself."

*I was thrilled to hear those words. But somehow the genius of that approach got lost as we were led into Iraq, and Osama bin Laden slipped away.*

*Robert J. Lifton of New York's City College, speaks of something he calls, the fundamentalist impulse. That impulse is to destroy the world in order to save it; in order to purify it. Christian fundamentalists think this way, too.*

*Let me note that there are some very positive impulses in fundamentalism. Christian Fundamentalists keep those on the left connected to Christian history, tradition, and western culture. That is always a good impulse and can at times act as a helpful corrective. But it must be said, fundamentalists don't often like real democracy. It's too sloppy -- men (and I mean "men" here) don't always have the last word.*

*Radical fundamentalists prefer a theocracy. Osama bin Laden preferred rule by a God made in the image of the Ayatollah Khomeini – a humorless God of wrath.*

*Fundamentalists don't like seeing the world opening up to all peoples. They especially don't like seeing unveiled women on the streets of Arab cities. They like it when women serve as secretaries, NOT as Secretaries of State. They want a world where women ride coach class, and they make their scriptures sound like they sanction that. The best part of President Bush's September 2001 speech called into question the "religious" impulses of our 9-11 attackers.*

"We are not deceived by their pretenses to piety. We have seen their kind before. They're the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century.

By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions, by abandoning every value except the will to power, they follow in the path of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism. And they will follow that path all the way to where it ends in history's unmarked grave of discarded lies.”

*Such great rhetoric.*

*You know, our American version of Democracy is only 200 years old. It's still in its experimental stage. The modern age is still just being born. What I am getting at is that I believe we are witnessing today a contest between the medieval world, and a modern world struggling to be born.*

*The fundamentalists, Islamic and Christian, are like Herod's soldiers in the Christmas story, killing all the young innocents, in their desperation to “save the world” from what? From the newness and liberation Jesus real teachings will bring.*

Well, it was true in 2011 and it appears to be true today.

Let me say something I imagine you, too, have been thinking. It's dawning on many of those young Russian soldiers in Ukraine that they are on the wrong side of history. The Ukrainian people are letting them know what a pathetic liar their president is, telling them that most Ukrainians will welcome them as liberators. Their families back home must be getting the message too. Especially their parents.

I want now to give my 33 year old daughter the last word here – she posted the following on Facebook, yesterday --

*Last night putting my kids to bed I couldn't help but think about the Ukrainian children falling asleep to the sound of explosions rather than lullabies, and sleeping in bomb shelters instead of warm beds. And wondering how many of those kids have daddies in the military like my kids do, and how many of those daddies will never come home. A strange thing happened when I became a mom. Suddenly it was like every single child in the whole world could be my kid, and I desperately want to protect them all.*



*I don't know if that happens to all moms or just some of us. But I'm convinced that if the whole world was run by moms, there would be a lot less wars. I know the Russian moms don't want their sons dying in Ukraine any more than the Ukrainian moms want their children and grandchildren dying defending their homes.*

Amen