

Third Sunday in Lent

March 20, 2022

Reflection by Sister Susan Quaintance, OSB

Ex 3:1-8a, 13-15; 1 Cor 10:1-6, 10-12; Lk 13:1-9

If Jesus were to walk into our house and sit down at table with us, I don't think it would take much time at all for talk to turn to what's happening in Ukraine. One of us might say "What about the people killed while standing in line for bread?" or "What about the airstrike on the theater where people were sheltering?" Though our concepts of sin and punishment likely differ from 1st century people, might Jesus just as easily ask – as he does in the first half of today's gospel – "Do you think that because these Ukrainians suffered in this way, they were greater sinners than all other Ukrainians? By no means."

I know that the Church, on this 3rd Sunday of Lent, intends this gospel, and all the liturgy, to lead me to reflect on repentance. After all, before Luke's Jesus goes on to tell the story of the fig tree that's given another chance to produce fruit, he ends that first section with the words: "But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did."

It seems unlikely that we will perish like the thousands of Ukrainians killed or wounded since the war began on February 24. (Though after the experience of the last two years, I have learned to be more skeptical about what I believe can and can't happen.) But we, along with the rest of the world, are witnesses. The war in Ukraine is front and center in Lent, 2022. So this Sunday's readings aren't so much leading me to thoughts about repentance as they are to thoughts about the suffering of the innocent.

It's hard to know what to do with all the emotions that this atrocity provokes: the rage and the heartbreak, the sense of powerlessness, the feeling of being overwhelmed by the images and numbers and complicated history, the guilt that comes from being so far away geographically, politically, economically.

Perhaps that, in itself, is a Lenten discipline. I need to keep listening and watching, especially when I want to stop. I need to pray, even when I wonder if it makes much difference. I need to be present – not just to the undeserved suffering of the Ukrainian people – but all those who bear harsh consequences for simply existing in the lives they do. I need to examine where I might participate in meting out those consequences and where I might be bearing some.

And perhaps the greatest discipline of all: I need to refuse to be hopeless. What reminded me of this is the first reading from Exodus. What prompts the theophany to Moses in the burning bush? God says, "I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering." Later, when God reveals the divine name, we learn that what most shapes and reflect God's identity is *be-ing*. That, more than anything else, God is. And as we know from so many theologians, God is nowhere more present than with those who suffer. There's a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer that has stayed with me a long time. He wrote to his parents from prison at Christmas 1943:

Misery, pain, poverty, loneliness, helplessness, and guilt have an altogether different meaning in God's

eyes than in the judgment of men. God turns toward the very places from which humans tend to turn

away.

Right now I AM is in the Ukraine.

On this first day of spring, may I be reminded to hope. May I remind you to hope. May the most unanswerable questions bring Jesus to the table, and may our wrestling with them help him stay.