

The City that Kills

2nd Sunday in Lent, 3/12/2022

Not long after a certain tyrant's morose and misguided legions invaded Ukraine the other week, the United States offered to spirit Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, to safety. His response, it is told, was to refuse, saying, "I need ammunition, not a ride." At the time of this writing, it is my understanding that he remains in Ukraine, leading and helping defend his country and its people, and the freedom that they have chosen. He and his people fight fiercely against the terror and war inflicted upon them, which is getting worse every day. They fight to repel both the tyrant and his legions on behalf not only of the people of Ukraine, but of all of us who, in the words of the Haitian revolution and motto of the state of New Hampshire, would live free or die.

I raise all that this morning not only because we are all likely to face that very choice ourselves, before this is over. Some of us have faced it before. Some say we face it already. But I speak from a pulpit in this manner because the same fey spirit one hears in the words of President Zelenskyy one also hears in the words of Jesus in today's gospel. We hear that the Pharisees, no less, come to Jesus and warn him, a bit breathlessly, that Herod wants to kill him, much as he did John the Baptizer before him. Whether or not this is after the man from Galilee had cursed certain Pharisees, among others, as "You brood of vipers," I do not know, but give credit where credit is due. These rabbis who started Judaism down the path to its modern forms after the fall of the 2nd Temple wanted to save Jesus's life, full stop. They also wanted to protect him and all their people from the murderous tyrant who ruled, incompetently but with an iron fist, their homeland.

But Jesus is not one to cower in fear or flee to save his skin. He is well aware, as he says elsewhere, that those who put their hand to the plough but look back are fit

neither to lead nor to serve, and that “whosoever would save his life shall lose it” (Mt. 16:25, Lk. 9:24). So he tells the Pharisees to give Herod a message for him. “Go tell that fox, here I stand; I can do no other. Here, I heal the sick and I cast out demons – and after that, it gets even better.” Jesus does not scare easily, that is, and has bigger fish to fry than the tetrarch of Galilee.

Don’t forget: Jesus has been tempted by the devil, after all, and not just for forty days in the wilderness. The temptations to serve himself or save the world by serving his power are with him all the time; temptation is like that. But if anything in creation could break him, he’d have broken by now. Take that, you old fox, and slink back to your hole.

Then, and still in front of the Pharisees and presumably his own disciples, Jesus gets much darker. He has set his sights on Jerusalem, the city that kills, and he knows that the city will kill him, in the end. Do not all prophets die there? Not exactly, not 100% of them, but the percentage is high enough that we get the point. In Jerusalem, Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, the Son of Mary, the Son of God, will meet the end of so many who speak truth to power, or who resist tyrants and the might of empire and its deceptions. He will meet the end of so many who act with power and great goodness, making people whole and freeing them from their diseases and abusers. That is not what he wants, though. It is what he will accept. What he wants is to gather the people of this city that kills under his wing, he says, as a hen does her brood – safe from foxes and eagles both, and from their own misguided wanderings.

He wants that, and longs for it – but they were not willing.

Why?

Perhaps they were like those of whom Paul writes, triangulating, to the people of Philippi: “...their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.”

Perhaps they were like the misguided Ivans at the spear-tip of the invasion of Ukraine, lied-to about where they were going and what they were to do when they got there.

Perhaps they were like their malevolent mis-guiders, eager to dominate the world with their greed and resentments, or turn a thriving nation into a graveyard and call it peace.

Perhaps they were like those caught somewhere in-between, enduring evils far longer than they should be endured, or 'just following orders'.

Perhaps could not see any reason for hope, or were just scared. People often are.

Perhaps they could not themselves cast out demons, and therefore resented those who had demons in need of casting out, or were jealous of those who could out-cast them.

Perhaps they could not heal, envied those who could, and begrudged those who needed it and the shine in their eyes when they found it.

Perhaps they could not – but enough. There is always something one can do, even if one cannot do everything. There is always a way to let a loving God draw us under the shadow of their wing as a mother hen draws in her young. There is always a way to let go, as the cliché goes, and let God. If we are willing.

But, he said, the people of the city that kills were not willing.

How did he know?

How I am supposed to know? Did God tell me? Tell you? Who among us has spoken with God, plumbed the depths of God's mind, or felt the longings of God's heart, the One who is all compassion and ever merciful, and yet a jealous God who brooks no rivals and who claims the right to all vengeance, and exacts it? And yet he knows – Jesus, that is; God in human form, love in human radiance – and has had to accept
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that some people, at least, choose to kill, though others choose to heal. Likewise, some choose wisdom, while others pursue folly.

Some hate with abandon; some love with the same abandon.

Some choose light; some choose dark. Some who choose light have darkness thrust upon them anyway. Some wander in darkness seeking a light they cannot find. Some find the light they seek, but get too close to it, and find that it can also burn, or melt, or sear. So as found Icarus in the myth, one of those “wild men who,” as the poet Dylan Thomas writes, “caught and sang the sun in flight / And learn too late they grieved it on its way”.¹

“Grieved it” in the sense of “to affect with grief or deep sorrow” (*OED*, sense 5) but also in the older sense of “to vex, trouble, or oppress” in mind and spirit (*OED*, sense 2). Icarus’s father Daedalus, in the myth, had built him wings with which to fly away from their prison home. He warned his son, however, not to fly too close to the sun, lest the wax that held the feathers to those wings melt, and Icarus fall. But fly too high he did, melt the wax did, and down fell Icarus, through an indifferent sky, to his death on the wine-dark sea. Daedalus watched him fall, watched him die, and was himself grieved – yet some say he rejoiced, in part, because his son had flown free, if but for a moment, and knew what it was like to have nothing in his way but the open sky. Icarus vexed the sun, but also brought it sorrow, for it meant no harm to him or to anyone, but could only do as it did, and be what it was. It shines upon the just and the unjust, after all, much as the rain falls on the righteous and the wicked both – and if you choose not to wear a hat outdoors, you must prepare for both water and heat to fall upon you from the sky.

¹ Dylan Thomas, “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night”. From *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*, published by New Directions. Copyright © 1952, 1953 Dylan Thomas. Copyright © 1937, 1945, 1955, 1962, 1966, 1967 the Trustees for the Copyrights of Dylan Thomas. Copyright © 1938, 1939, 1943, 1946, 1971 New Directions Publishing Corp. Used with permission from: <https://poets.org/poem/do-not-go-gentle-good-night>

In a different myth from Greece, a different son grieves a different father, but this time hurts far more than the two of them. This was Phaeton, son of the sun god Helios and Clymene, a nymph-goddess of the sea. He journeyed to meet his father, and when he learned that Daddy had a chariot that drove the sun itself across the heavens, couldn't wait to get behind the wheel, as it were, and feel all that horsepower in his hands. Helios warned Phaeton that he could not control those horses, but Phaeton would not listen. Off he flew, and soon lost control. High flew the horses, and the land beneath them as they did so turned to ice. Then low flew the horses, and the land beneath them was scorched to desert. Helios was grieved, in both senses – as was the earth. So also was Zeus, though mostly in the sense of being vexed, furious that the earth itself and all life on it was threatened by a madman mis-handling nuclear material. So he struck the chariot with a thunderbolt, and Phaeton was killed.

Let it never be forgotten that a bolt from the blue can, in the right hands, resolve a situation in which someone has gone rogue, chosen evil, and grieves us all.

Jerusalem, the city that kills, the city that would not allow Jesus to gather it under his wings, has grieved him and the Lord in both these ways. It has vexed God, and it has caused God sorrow. It had done so – its people had done so, to be precise – many times before, and have done so many times since. That its people would do this, and do it in the name of a host of empires and at least three major religions, caused at least one of the city's medieval defenders to wonder he should not, before losing it, “burn it to the ground. Your holy places - ours. Every last thing in Jerusalem that drives men mad.” The speaker here is Balian of Ibelin, defending the city from the armies of Saladin, as told in the movie *Kingdom of Heaven*. Saladin, to whom Balian says it, and who is one of the few conquerors of that or any city to not slaughter the

bulk of its inhabitants as part of the conquest, replies to this, laughing, “I wonder if it would not be better if you did.”²

Yet the city stands, divided and often bloody, the scene of many prayers and many betrayals. In it, with the servants of a loving God, Ha-Shem, Allah, call that God what you will live side by side, or wall by wall, with those whose god is the belly and whose faith in is selfishness and folly. In this they are like those who live in any city, though in Jerusalem the conflicts are more present, more raw, and more intractable than almost anywhere. Almost, he said, mindful of Kyiv and Kharkiv, Mariupol, Lviv, Odessa, and others, which their evil invaders are at present turning not into cities that kill, but into cities that are killed.

If we cannot stop the destruction, may we at least do what Jesus wanted to do: gather the people of such cities under our wing – for unlike the people of Jesus’s Jerusalem, they are most willing.

We should want to say, to be able to say, “Go and tell that fox [that would be a reference to the one who has launched this war – a man who, like Herod, has slaughtered children without remorse] for us, 'Listen, we are casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day we finish our work.’” But the work of salvation has already been done. The work of liberation, of freedom, and of care for the victims of war in Ukraine and elsewhere remains still to do, as it does wherever live any who would live free or die. *Amen.*

² The aftermath of the conquest was not without its horrors, however, particularly for women. Though Saladin allowed many residents of the city to buy their way to freedom or simply gave it to them, he let thousands, mostly women, be raped and/or enslaved instead. See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jerusalem_\(1187\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jerusalem_(1187)) for more information. Movie quote: *Kingdom of Heaven* © 2005 20th Century Fox. Source: [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_Heaven_\(film\)](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_Heaven_(film)).