

*Based on Luke 4:1-13. Jesus Faces His Inner Demons*

*This is one of the greatest demonstrations of good versus evil that we have seen during our lifetimes.*

So said Senator Mitt Romney, one week ago today, of the unprovoked invasion of Ukraine by Russian military forces. Just as the last members of the so-called “Greatest Generation,” who fought World War II, are leaving us, another brutal “bad guy” with expansionist territorial fantasies in Europe rattles the western world, shattering the foundations of a hard-won decades’ long architecture of stability in the process.

Truly, as we anxiously cheer on heroic underdogs who win day after day by the courageous strategy of *simply not losing*, we are indeed watching a stark real-time battle of good versus evil. Even as we are warned by experts to expect things will get worse. And evil will win. At least on the surface. If not today or tomorrow, we are warned, very likely in the next week or two. Or ten.

As if that expert analysis were not enough to dash our spirit of solidarity, we are compelled to confess an additional demonstration of good versus evil that has played out alongside this particular crisis: blatant racism in the evacuation of Ukraine’s population of color. And perhaps the less blatant but equally racist horror of a White western world, that has become so de-sensitized to the great demonstrations of evil against black and brown people, that we now find ourselves aghast at the previously unthinkable: premeditated war by a nuclear power against “people who look like - and live like - us.”

Which is not to say we should not be aghast. We should be! We have to be! We need to be. We are right to rally around the world in response, we are right to donate right here and now to our mission partners in the region, we are right to buy out AirBnB locations in Ukraine so average citizens can maintain an income, we are right to pray for peace even while those who protect us are preparing for the worst. We are right to say *no*, this is *not* who we want to be in this world, and we will sign up right here today with the better angels of our nature.

At the same time, we must confess, if this is truly our lifetime’s first encounter with such a great demonstration of evil, we have either been incredibly lucky or we have been living in a very protected bubble or we have been failing to pay attention. Today is, after all, the fifty-seventh anniversary of “Bloody Sunday” in Selma, Alabama.

Evil, it turns out, is everywhere. Including “in here.”

Jesus knows this as he emerges from the Jordan on the other side of his baptism and follows the leading of the Spirit into the wilderness in our Lesson from Luke today.

Jesus is a heroic underdog, himself, having lived his entire existence in the face of overwhelming military force from an occupying power. The devastating consequences of a crushed rebellion in his own hometown just

before he was born have been shown to him and spoken to him since he was a child. Roman place names have substituted local Hebrew ones in order to prove to an occupied people who is “really” in charge of the land they call home. Armed officers are everywhere holding the civilian population in check, often brutally.

The baptism of Jesus has been an amazing escape from all of that. A truly transformative moment! But a short dip in the River Jordan for Jesus, baptized in goodness, as transformative as it has been, does not change the outer reality of the world in which Jesus lives. Jesus must transition from that transformation back into a world that has not yet been so transformed.

To be sure, the baptism of Jesus does *fill him with the Holy Spirit*. Which is something. And it calls him, so filled, to stare down what you and I might call “the devil within.” That capacity for evil – so seductive, so tempting – that resides within us all. That can quote Scripture! That can rationalize its work by seeming to do good! *The road to hell is, after all, paved with good intentions.*

This is why, I think, Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Not because it necessarily changes the outcome of evil actions “out there” in the world. But because it does necessarily change our capacity for compassion within for those parts of ourselves that also struggle.

Mahatma Gandhi does the same thing as he resists the brute force of the occupying power of *his* time, one you and I would call *ally* today. Gandhi calls his way of confronting evil “Soul Force.” Radical love in non-violent transformation of the evil inflicted upon his people. And he says his first non-violent action, his first “Soul Force” of transforming evil through the power of love, was required toward himself.

This is what we say in our own baptismal liturgy today, as well. *We renounce the presence of evil in the world*, we say, in our baptism, meaning we declare we no longer wish to engage *those powers and principalities* – both within and without – *that defy God’s vision of The Beloved Community.*

And it is hard.

But there is good news! For Jesus, as well as for us, this short dip in the water, baptized in goodness, filled with the Spirit, also *brings healing* from our wrestling with evil. Both Matthew and Mark, in their telling of this story from our Lesson in Luke, conclude with an image of angels tending Jesus once the devil finally departs. There can be - there *will* be! - divine healing in the aftermath of our encounter with evil. Of evil’s encounter with us.

Holy Saturday says the same thing, as angels tend the broken body of Jesus in the tomb, preparing him for resurrection.

We need healing, too, to be sure. Because the unmistakable truth is that, as much as evil costs us, renouncing evil can seem to cost us more. Mothers of children with cancer and old men and grandmothers who, by all rights, have earned the right to succumb to evil without a fight are instead battling back, sometimes to their death. Nuclear power plant operators held at gunpoint are working shift after shift after shift without rest,

committed to keeping the world safe from meltdown. Economic stability in this country and around the world is and will continue to be sacrificed in order to make our own stand of solidarity.

We need healing, to be sure, because renouncing evil costs us, too. But we do *not* need to despair! If there is anything The Way of Jesus has to say about good versus evil, it is that *good always wins!* We may not be promised a world without evil, but in the end, no matter what, even if we cannot see it just yet, the promise of Easter insists that somehow, someday, goodness *is* stronger!

In the wake of World War II, and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, beloved author and armchair theologian C. S. Lewis reflected on life in the new atomic age.

*Do not let us begin, he says, by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. You and all whom you love were already sentenced to death. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things – praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts – not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs.*

In the meantime, our *Blessing for a Medium Sad Journey Through Lent* reminds us, *God is here, walking with us ... slowly lifting our chin toward hope. Not promising to erase the pain, but to carry it with us.*

And in the meantime, we *live*. We laugh and we love. We make friends and we prepare a feast. And we are blessed to realize that *we are never - were never - alone. And somehow, that is good enough.*

Let the church say, Amen!