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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: II Chronicles 28: 8-15; Matthew 5: 21-24
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A World on the Brink: Lessons from a Minor Prophet

Midway through Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, we find this haunting description of Napoleon's invasion of Russia:

“On the 12th of June the forces of Western Europe crossed the frontier and the war began, that is, an event took place opposed to human reason and all human nature. Millions of men perpetuated against one another so great a mass of crime – fraud, swindling, robbery, forgery, issue of counterfeit money, plunder, incendiarism, and murder – that the annals of all the criminal courts of the world could not muster such a sum of wickedness in whole centuries, though the men who committed those deeds did not at that time look on them as crimes.”¹

On Thursday morning, upon reading the news that Russia had begun a full scale invasion of Ukraine, it was Tolstoy to whom I turned. Ironically, whereas in 1812, it was Napoleon visiting crimes of aggression upon Russia, now the direction was reversed, with Russia serving as the aggressor. We do not yet know what that action will mean, for the world or for us. We do not yet know if it will lead to a conflagration as great as the one in 1812, or 1914, or the 1940's, or if it's something less consequential. What we do know is that this week, an event took place that is opposed to human reason and human nature - at least as I understand those things - in which tens of thousands of people are now perpetuating a mass of crime against others – plunder, incendiarism, and murder. Tolstoy would have sensed the inhumanity of the moment; we can wonder if there are those among Russia's elite who sense the same.

Whatever else Thursday's invasion might mean, it has left a lot of us filled with uncertainty – as if we weren't living with enough of that already! – and with a new and creeping unease. And it has flooded us with questions about where we are heading as a world. What I would like to do today is to step back from questions about the immediate future, to which I have no ready answers, and to reflect on a bigger question that we would do well to think about, as citizens and as people who claim to have a faith in God. The question is this: how are we to live in a difficult and dangerous time such as this? What does our faith encourage us to be, and to do? What guidance might the Scriptures offer us, especially the all but unknown story we heard earlier, about the prophet Oded in the book of Chronicles?

Most of us are probably unfamiliar with Oded. He makes only a brief appearance in the book of Chronicles, and is merely identified as being a prophet of the Lord, which is to say, someone who speaks on behalf of God. He shows up at the end of a war, rather than at the beginning of one, a war that shares certain parallels with what we're seeing in Russia and Ukraine. The presence of Oded can be helpful to us, for he provides a kind of clarity and moral purpose that we might look to in this moment.

Here's the story. Israel and Judah had recently been united under David and Solomon. But a dispute set the two kingdoms against one another, leading to what the writer of Chronicles

¹ Tolstoy, Leo, *War and Peace* (New York: Modern Library Edition, 1994), pg. 687.

called “a great slaughter.” Israel, the stronger of the two, emerged victorious. When we joined the story, a long line of prisoners, some two hundred thousand, we’re told, were being marched to Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom. The expectation was that those who could work would be turned into slaves, while the rest would be executed. That’s the scene: a victorious army returning home with a train of prisoners. It’s not unlike what some have predicted for the current conflict, where the elected officials of Ukraine may be captured, and then disappeared into the Russian prison system.

“But a prophet of the Lord was there,” the text tells us, a figure not unlike Tolstoy, caught up in a bitter lover’s quarrel with his own country and its practices. Speaking to the victorious soldiers, Oded says, “You have killed them in a rage that has reached up to heaven.” He goes on to say that they will compound their guilt with a harsh treatment of their captives. “You intend to subjugate the people of Judah and Jerusalem,” Oded says. “But what have you except sins against the Lord your God?” He goes on to implore the army to send back the captives they had taken. Miraculously, the civilian leaders listen. They tell the army, “You shall not bring on us guilt against the Lord in addition to our present sins.” The returning warriors were sent to their homes, and then, in a gesture of magnanimity, instead of being executed or enslaved, the captives were given clothes, and sandals. They are given food and drink, and then escorted back to their kindred at Jericho.

As I read the story, three important lessons stand out that I’d like to highlight. Taken together, they reveal what I hope can be something like the word of God spoken to us in one more fraught moment of our public life.

The first lesson I sense has to do with Oded’s conviction about the sanctity of human life. There were no Geneva Conventions in the days of Chronicles, but, like Tolstoy, Oded knew well that any war, and any act of aggression meant to claim territory, must begin by devaluing and dehumanizing those against whom one takes up arms. We don’t know where Oded was at the beginning of the conflict between Israel and Judah. I like to believe he was there all along urging against it. But upon its completion, he is certainly present, continuing to remind the public of the abhorrence of killing – the stench of it rose up to heaven – and of their ongoing obligations to one another as fellow human beings.

On Friday morning, as I was seeking to digest the news from Ukraine, I read the account of a more recent Oded, Harry Emerson Fosdick. Fosdick was the first senior minister of the Riverside Church in New York City, and on Armistice Day in 1933, what we now call Veterans’ Day he preached a sermon for the ages. Fosdick had served in World War I as a chaplain, and he was so appalled by the callous disregard for all human life that he became a dedicated pacifist until the end of his days. Here’s how he concludes that sermon:

“I renounce war because of what it does to men. I have watched them come in gassed from the front line trenches. I have seen the long, long hospital trains filled with their mutilated bodies. I have heard the cries of the crazed and the prayers of those who wanted to die and could not...I renounce war because of what it compels us to do to our enemies, bombing their mothers and villages, starving their children by blockades, laughing over our coffee cups about every damnable thing we have been able to do to them. I renounce war for its consequences, for the lies it lives on and propagates, for the undying hatreds it arouses, for the dictatorships it puts in the place of democracies, for

the starvation that stalks in its wake. I renounce war, and never again, directly or indirectly, will I sanction or support another.”²

It is given to the prophets of the Lord to remind the world over and over and over again of the essential sanctity of human life, especially the lives of those we are tempted to deem enemies. That is the first and most fundamental truth of any religion worthy of the name. Those religions that forget or ignore that truth have abdicated whatever moral authority they otherwise might have had.

That basic insight need not be a prescription for passivity among those who find themselves subjected to aggression. Ukrainians have every right to defend themselves against their aggressors, as do all of those who find themselves attacked or abused by another. But that right must always be tempered and conditioned by the core insight offered by those like Oded, or Tolstoy, or Fosdick – an affirmation of the essential sanctity of all human life. I take it that that was exactly what was happening when the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, addressed his Russian aggressors in Russian earlier in the week. He did his best to remind his listeners of the humanity of those they would soon be attacking, while also appealing to the basic decency of ordinary Russians who would wind up being hurt by the invasion. While it can be difficult to maintain that perspective after hostilities begin, that intervention belongs to the tradition of Oded, which cuts against the dehumanization of others that is a standard practice of warfare. We too must keep that first lesson of Oded alive in our minds as this conflict heats up. We must never catch ourselves degrading or dehumanizing the other, even when and if we find their behaviors abhorrent.

The second lesson that Oded conveys to us is this: when it comes to war, nobody’s hands are entirely clean, and so responsibility for its violence must be shared. Oded, that internal critic of his own people, blasts them for their intention to subjugate the people of Judah, calling it a sin against the Lord. What I don’t want you to hear me saying is that Ukraine somehow courted this disaster, or that Ukraine bears responsibility for the attacks it is suffering. Rather, I hear a particular warning in Oded’s statement that we in America do well to acknowledge in this moment. After all, as appalled as we are by Mr. Putin’s actions, I think it helps us to understand how much of the world felt when the United States invaded and occupied Iraq – both times. It gives us insight into how much of the world might have felt in early 2020 when the US preemptively targeted Iranian leaders, causing many to ask the same question we’re asking now – would that act precipitate another war? It gives us insight into how other countries might feel when we have chosen to intervene in democratically elected countries for our own national gains – throughout the 70’s and 80’s the US intervened in countries throughout Latin America on average every 18 months or so. Finally, as the world rightly rejects Mr. Putin’s claim that Ukraine belongs to Russia through mystic ties of brotherhood, we must remember that it is, in essence, a form of manifest destiny that Putin is now enacting, not at all unlike what the United States did throughout the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. Indeed, I suspect that’s one of the reasons that far right leaders here and abroad have had such difficulty condemning this action. It looks and feels an awful lot like the processes used in many Western countries to assert and maintain their own dominance in the world. For all the outrage and horror that many are feeling in the wake of this attack, I have seen or heard few voices reflecting on the ways Mr. Putin’s actions have mirrored many of our own.

² Harry Emerson Fosdick, “The Unknown Soldier,” November 12, 1933. Text found online: <https://levantium.com/the-unknown-soldier/>

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus tells us that when we bring a gift to the altar, and remember that someone has something against us, we are to leave that gift at the altar, go and be reconciled with the aggrieved person, and then come back to offer the gift. That teaching is usually understood in personal terms, but I wonder if it should also be applied corporately. What would it mean if we came to worship God, we remembered those whom we have wronged, or those who have a grievance against us for the ways in which we have used and misused our power in the world? What would it mean to recognize that others may have grievances worthy of our recognition and our best efforts of reconciliation? The second lesson of Oded, then, combined with that teaching of Jesus, might result in less hubris on our part and more humility, less self-righteousness and a whole lot more penitence.

The third and final lesson of Oded concerns where the most valuable source of authority is found. It is not found in the military, or among the returning soldiers. It is not found among the political leaders of the day. It is not found among the religious establishment. The source of moral authority emerges from the people. To be more precise, it emerges first from one person, and then it spreads to local and regional leaders who take up Oded's message of mercy. Moral insight is often like that. Frequently, it takes an outsider, someone who is willing to stand apart from the crowd, someone who is willing to speak in a singular voice, for moral authority to take hold. That singular voice is persuasive, and little by little, or sometimes quite quickly, others come to understand that moral force. Such was the case when Homer Plessy boarded a train in New Orleans in 1892 and refused to go to the segregated car, very few white people were prepared to countenance that moral force. It took another sixty years for that singular witness to ignite in the Civil Rights Movement. Such was the case when Sister Helen Prejean made her stand against the death penalty in the United States – hers was a lonely voice of mercy that we still haven't fully heard. Such is the case right now with the jailed critic of Russia's policies, Alexei Navalny, who returned to Russia in order to face his accusers publicly, knowing he would be imprisoned. And such is the case with the many protesters who have taken to the street in Russia this past week to protest the invasion of Ukraine. Each of them stand in the lonely tradition of the prophet Oded, urging public mercy amidst a cruel and callous reality. It doesn't always happen, but the miracle is that sometimes, sometimes, the message truly is absorbed.

In this age of rising authoritarianism, Oded's third lesson stands supreme. Mr. Putin has made himself popular among those who would like to impose a traditional, heteronormative, white, macho, and nominally Christian order of the world upon the rest of us. That's not a world, or a version of Christian faith, that I wish to support, or associate with. Both now, and I suspect for a long time to come, it will take singular voices, like that of Oded, to stand out, and to call forth a more humane, which is to say, a more merciful upon the planet. Thankfully, those voices are present in all the places afflicted by those anti-democratic strains – here, in Ukraine, in Russia and many other places besides. I give thanks for the Odeds of the world, who continually remind us of another, more merciful, way to conduct ourselves.

As for us, I would have us be among those who listen carefully to the voice of this most minor of prophets. We don't yet know what this invasion will mean for us. In the near term, we shall be forced to live with considerable uncertainty. In the midst of that uncertainty, however, there are bedrock truths that can stabilize us: that we must never dehumanize our opponents in any conflict; that we must approach situations like this with considerable humility, seeking reparation for the harms that we ourselves have caused; and that a singular voice speaking the name of mercy holds more sway than all the bullets and bombs in the world. Our faith grants each of us the courage to trust that God is holding us, is holding Ukraine, and is holding all of

those who, like Oded, and like Tolstoy, who insist that human beings are more than pawns, or disposable cannon fodder. It may be that we shall be called to stand among them before this is through.

As a reminder of who and what we're called to be as people of faith and conscience, I'd to invite all of you to rise and join in praying publicly, together, the prayer of St. Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.