

Laura Fitzpatrick-Nager
 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Psalm 130:5-6; Matthew 17:1-8; Matthew 25:35-36
 March 20, 2022

The Glory of God is the Human Being Fully Alive

The spotlight glowed on the shining faces of the five actors entering the small stage from the wings. They were shining like the sun. Each person moved individually and yet as one, twirling arms, making noises, twisting their bodies in wheelchairs and in walkers. They became a rhythm of wheels, one body tapping out their story. It was mesmerizing. “We are the Wheels of Life Troupe.” they called out in unison. A twenty-year acting ensemble from Stony Creek, in Branford made up of differently-abled folks and their siblings.¹

Then, the stage lights dimmed and one by one the individual actors stood alone in the floodlights and told their stories. Monologues of pain and joy, of battling depression and imagining a future of hope alongside the hardship of living often overlooked. I’m not sure you’d have noticed these actors if you passed them on the sidewalk. But here, they were captivating the audience with their honesty and their bravery, the power of their voices and stories held me rapt as I watched them transfigure in the light.

The next morning, a different stage, the world stage. I watched breathless this past Wednesday as President Zelensky spoke to the US Congress- and the world. He was not in person, of course, but the power of his presence, his eloquence, dignity and courage shone through to all who listened across the miles beyond the devastation taking place in real time within his country. Zelenski had been an actor and comedian in his former life, but now, while he may have been filming from a bunker deep underground, he spoke truth to power from the mountaintop while imploring President Biden for more immediate military assistance and thanked the nation and world for their extraordinary support. The tears and applause were deafening.

Zelensky also showed a video—very hard to watch— with images familiar to all of us. The film opened with images of his beloved country in living color just a few weeks ago with its green blossoms and children playing on playgrounds. Juxtaposed with those pastoral images of the BEFORE, were the stark destruction of Ukraine’s cities today filmed in all its bloody black and white. Bombed out buildings smoky skies, mass graves. I tried not to turn away.

What is our role here on the sidelines of this conflict? How do we as people of faith hold this place amidst the staggering toll of loss without becoming numb? What is so striking about our current world situation is both recognizing the magnitude of suffering alongside the overwhelming solidarity uniting much of the world as it tries to assist the Ukrainian people and the nearly 4.5 million refugees displaced throughout Europe.

In many ways, we’re living the tension Dickens famously wrote about in a Tale of Two Cities, a story set against the conditions that led up to the French Revolution and a different Reign of Terror, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”²

¹ <https://www.legacytheatre.org/wheel-life-theatre-troupe>

² Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*. 1859.

Another Transfiguration story I've been following is of a Ukrainian minister named Fyodor Raychynets on FaceBook as he posts an image and entry each day about what he's experiencing from his home community outside of Kyiev. Yesterday was Day 23. In a recent interview the minister and theologian, Fyodor Raychynets explained his story. That he's chosen to stay with his people at his own peril to help those in the combat zone, taking up what he calls, "the rear guard".³ Raychynets, whose wife died last year of COVID, spends the better part of each day seeking to preserve his own humanity in the face of evil by taking care of those senior citizens left behind.

In a podcast I am transfixed by Raychynets hoarse, full voice sounding so nearby as he describes his daily routine with the small band of volunteers he's assembled. They bring food, water and comfort to those who have nowhere else to go. He is love incarnate, radiating like sunlight from the rubble.

The seminary where he teaches was destroyed the other day along with his office and all of his belongings. "It is a land of total desolation", he said. The military told him yesterday if he continues to do this outreach they can no longer protect him as it remains too dangerous to be there. Raychynets said, "I don't know what the future will bring but I am staying here to take up the rear." Those on the front lines are fighting with all they've got, so are we.

I'm just trying to stay human.

The extraordinary efforts of volunteers, soldiers and fellow neighbors offering humanitarian assistance even in the face of certain death is remarkable. Like the World Kitchen chefs feeding refugees on the border, it is another story of love transfigured even as war rages on.

Writes St Irenaeus in the 2nd century, 'the glory of God is the human being fully alive.'

In our scripture for today (a story found in all 4 gospels), something powerful is emanating from Jesus. He's been ministering to crowds all around the Galilee region and on this day he's climbed up to higher ground with some of the disciples, Peter, James and John, where his true nature is revealed.

Any time there's a mountaintop scene in scripture you know it's gonna be big (harken back to Moses meeting God on Mount Sinai). In the narrative, Jesus becomes larger than life and even his clothes are dazzling.

Transfiguration comes from the Greek, *metamorphosis*. I'm sure you can imagine as I can those moments in our own lives where the true nature of someone we love is revealed in a flash. When suddenly we see them in a whole new light, a fuller light. They or you are illuminated, lit from within by authenticity and their truest being. It is an awe-inspiring, transformational moment.

In a revelation, Jesus' identity becomes clear; a beloved child of God. Soon, he will be coming down the mountain to continue his ministry and take the long walk to Jerusalem, to the cross. He's been preparing the disciples for what's coming. Peter wants this moment to last longer and ready to build houses for everyone to keep them safe up there on the mountain away from the suffering and hardships of the world below! I can relate to wanting to keep the world at bay a little longer so that everyone stays just as they are.

But, of course, reality doesn't work that way. Jesus is ready to return to his ministry of loving the least, last and lost. Sensing the disciples' fear, he touches them and says, "Get up and do not fear." With this healing touch, he leads them back down the mountain into the trenches of life.

³ [A Voice from Kyiv: Fyodor Raychynets / Faithful Presence in the War on Ukraine](#)

(Matthew's slant on the gospel is always to have listeners remember that Jesus stands on the legacy of the prophets of old, Moses and Elijah. Just as Moses was born under Pharaoh's death sentence, Jesus is now facing the threat of Herod's empire.)

Jesus' identity is clarified once again as we hear God's voice reminding us of the belovedness of Jesus- and each of us—in the kin-dom of God. This moment asks us to consider who Jesus is to us. In the prior chapter, Jesus is asking the crowd, *Who do you say that I am?* (16:15) That is a leap of faith question. Where have you seen him appear of late in the faces of those you love or when sitting in the pews or gathered around tables at the New London Community Meal Center?

The story of the Transfiguration urges us to trust that what we have seen, what we have known, will go with us. It assures us that the gifts received on the mountaintop will continue to illuminate us not only on level ground but especially, when we walk in the valley of the shadow- or take up the rear guard in basements as the Ukrainian minister has bravely done. Even through the havoc of war, the uncertainty of the future, Christ's touch is there. It is there in the resilience of the human spirit, in the kindness of strangers and in the hope we carry for one another.

As a church, we are trying to do our part. Thanks to your generosity, our Missions board has sent an initial gift of funds to several worthy aid organizations working on the ground with refugees or helping those within and beyond Ukrainian borders.

But whether we are here in Old Lyme or elsewhere, we are all bound together to walk alongside one another, to shine the light of wild mercy on the small or larger stages of our lives.

Writes the historian, Howard Zinn, "To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness.

What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.

And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.⁴

Amen

⁴ Howard Zinn, *A Power Governments Cannot Suppress*, 2007.