

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: August 14, 2022
Sermon: "WAR: An Essay of Despair and Hope"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scriptures: The 23rd Psalm; The Lord's Prayer

Psalm 23

The Divine Shepherd A Psalm of David.

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.*

The Lord's Prayer

*Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts
as we forgive those our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.*

PART I

I've been going to Prague for 18 years, almost every year, always with a writing task in mind: to start a book, to finish a book, to edit a book. This year, right after the Dogwood Festival, I headed out with no plans, no project, lots of blank paper, and plenty of pens.

The war in Ukraine was in its third month, and our Church had already done quite a bit with town-wide prayer vigils, a Ukrainian peace rally, raising funds for a hospital and emergency supplies, bringing in riveting and knowledgeable speakers to deepen our understanding.

But I wasn't prepared for how war took over my time in Prague. My driver from the airport was a recent Ukrainian War refugee. In Prague itself, Ukrainian flags were everywhere—in store windows, up on church altars, hanging from balconies, nailed to doors.

My friend's church stands at the foot of the famous Charles Bridge, a great expansive 13th century stone church structure, and across the entire width of the church they placed a banner large enough to be seen in Moscow, declaring, "Hands off Ukraine, Putin."

My first Sunday in Prague I was writing in a little coffee house in Old Town Square on a quiet, sleepy Sunday, when I began to hear loud roars, chanting, singing, shouting, marching, the sound of a few thousand Ukrainians marching to the main square, praying for peace, thanking NATO, expressing hope. And when people asked me where I was from, and I said, "The USA," they cheered!

Meanwhile, every day I'm doing my regular Prague routine: Prayer. Get up early, find an open church, pray, have communion, go to a coffeehouse, write, walk, hit another church, more communion, pray my Greenfield Hill Church prayer list, some 40 names and categories, updated every day as I hear from

home. Another walk, another coffee house, more writing, another church, more prayer.

With my wobbly, artificial knees, I kneel on those ancient wooden kneelers and even-more-ancient stone floors and pray my prayers; and then I make the rounds of each candle-lighting station, over and over and over and over again. I'm praying, and I'm writing. And day by day my prayers are overwhelmed, overtaken, darkened by war. Every evil of war being played out in real-time, in living color, videotaped and Instagrammed and Tweeted for all to see.

The megalomania of Putin, the genocide and holocaust and war crimes, the reminiscences of our worst memories of the old Soviet Union, the old Stalin, the old Hitler.

And I'm praying, hard. *Hard*. I'm praying for peace, just as the Bible says. I'm praying for the peacemakers, just as Jesus says. I'm praying for good to triumph over evil, just as the Bible says. I'm praying for David to defeat Goliath, for Goliath to be beheaded, for Pharaoh to be humbled, for Babylon to be defeated, for the Philistines to go home, for all those Biblical images and Biblical parallels to come true today. An end to Putin and Putinism. A victory for freedom-loving people. An end to madness. A triumph for the Prince of Peace.

And it's not happening.

The front page of our Sunday bulletin, look at it, and the back page. They're the same as the front and back pages of my essay. George Washington is kneeling in the snow in Valley Forge, kneeling in prayer, during the darkest hours of the Revolutionary War, when victory was very distant, when defeat was far more certain, when hope was in short supply.

On the back page, Jesus, kneeling in the Garden of Gethsemane, kneeling in prayer, his own death very certain, his own agony very real, when resignation was stronger than hope.

And thus I was in Prague, a man of prayer. "Oh, what a pious fellow," anyone would have said of me, observing my daily routine. "He's always on his knees in prayer, muttering almost out loud, fervent and faithful, every day, several times a day. A pious fellow."

One priest at a noonday service said, "Weren't you here at 8 AM?" A nun asked, "Who are you?" My Czech priest friend said, "You are always the first to arrive and the last to leave, and you don't even understand a word I say!"

But what no one knew was that each day, with each season of prayer, I'm getting more upset, more angry, more urgent, more radical, more disturbing, even to myself. I went from praying for peace to praying for an end to evil, to naming the evil as Putin and Putinism, to praying for his death, his assassination. I'm not telling you this because I'm right or I'm proud of it, but because this was my prayer journey . . . Even, as I confess in the essay, my spiritual depression.

So there I sit in Prague, certainly one of the most beautiful capital cities on Earth, truly my own personal paradise, where nothing but good has ever happened to me, where nothing but wonder has ever filled my spirit, there I sit: unhappy with myself, unhappy with God, unhappy with the state of the world, unhappy with religion.

Is that what you pay me for? To think such thoughts? To have such feelings? To preach them from your pulpit? We'll see.

PART II

There's a saying in Christianity, "It's Friday, but Sunday's a-comin'." As you can guess, it refers to Holy Week, to Christ's Passion, to Jesus's death on the cross on Good Friday, when everything literally turned dark; when it all seemed bleak and over and hopeless. That's Friday, Good Friday. But then Sunday comes. Easter Sunday: when the sun shines brightly and the tomb is empty and Jesus talks with his friends and eats with the Disciples, and life is very, very, very much alive.

We live in a time of despair, or at least in a mood, a spirit, of despair. "America is dead." I actually hear that, read that, I am told that. Democracy is dead. The economy is dead. The church is dead. God is dead. Yet we believe in a faith, *and* we're sitting in a Church where even the dead aren't dead! We are an Easter Church. Still, despair and its kissing cousins, fear and anxiety, lurk in every corner.

Either half of this country will tell you why the other half is evil, traitorous, dastardly. Newspapers, talk show hosts, Cable TV, political leaders, operatives, the Internet, family members, neighbors, Facebook friends—we all have people in our ears telling us the worst of America, the worst of ourselves, the worst of everything and everyone.

I don't buy it. I don't accept it. I don't choose to think that way. I can't stay with despair. Yes, my essay is two-thirds full of it. I've just done half my sermon

wallowing in it. I know despair. I just can't stay there. I choose Hope. Hope is a choice. It takes work, commitment. You decide to hope, and you work at it. You hear that? Hope is a choice. It takes work. That's a wonderfully brilliant thought. You could cross-stitch it, hang it on your wall. I am so wise!

But Karen Fox, our Deacon co-chair, said all this six days ago in her Deacon's Devotion. "Hope is a choice," Karen said, quoting Christopher Reeve, Superman. She even described Hope as the superpower she embraces while tackling the world's tough issues in her profession. Hope as a superpower. I like that!

And superpowers are meant to be used. Superman not flying isn't Superman. Wonder Woman not saving the world isn't Wonder Woman. Spiderman not using his web isn't Spiderman. And Black Panther sitting around whining isn't Black Panther. Hope that isn't hoped, and worked at, isn't Hope. And followers of Christ are, by definition, hopeful.

You may know the old story of two siblings whose parents were worried about them. One was an eternal pessimist, the other, an eternal optimist. So they are taken to a psychiatrist. Each child is put a room piled high with manure. After an hour, the psychiatrist opens the door on the pessimist. The pessimist is huddled in the corner, grossed out by the stench, immobilized by despair. Then the psychiatrist checks on the other child, the optimist. The psychiatrist opens the door, and the little kid is immersed in the manure, speedily digging through the manure with his hands. "What are you doing?" The psychiatrist asked. "I'm looking," the child says, happily. "With all this manure, there must be a pony in here somewhere." Choosing hope is digging through the manure.

Believe me: I smell the manure. I see it all around us. But I'm digging for that pony. Which is what I did in Prague, writing that essay, praying for Ukraine, with despair knocking loud on my heart.

I knew I had to dig. I knew I had to work through it. I know, after a lifetime as a pastor, that as your pastor I'm going to be surrounded by occasions for despair, coming at me, coming at you, at us, from every which way. I knew I couldn't come home from Prague in despair, defeatist, negative, beaten.

I knew I had to dig my way through the manure, which I did in two ways. First, when I prayed, I refused to end on a bad note. I refused to pray with what an old hymn called "dumb resignation."

Many of you know the advice given to newlyweds: "Don't go to bed angry." Stay up as long as it takes to put anger aside. So I decided to apply that to prayer. No matter how despairing I felt, I ended every prayer hopeful. I looked for signs of Hope in my day. I placed symbols of Hope in my prayer.

I worked at it, thinking, asking: who are the heroes of this war? Where are the occasions of sacrifice? What courage, determination, yes, faith, are evidenced each day? Put that in the prayer. All those values highlighted by Jesus and across the Scriptures. Where do we see them in action? Where are the "peacemakers"? Who is "walking the extra mile," "turning the other cheek"? Who are our modern-day Joshuas, Deborahs, Daniels, fighting battles in new ways, finding new strategies? Put that in the prayer. What were the examples of true Christian charity, of real mission at work, living, breathing Good News in the middle of war? And what in my own life would feed Hope? I put that in the prayer.

Karen Fox, in her Deacon's Devotion, rightly urged us to "practice Hope," providing a list of hopeful practices. You remember the old joke about the tourist who asks a New York cab driver how to get to Carnegie Hall? "Practice, practice, practice." Well, how do you work your way to Hope? Same thing: Practice.

Each practice on Karen's list begins with a verb, and verbs carry the action, right? So Karen's list stops us from the passivity of despair and pushes us to the activity of Hope.

And I did that by returning to two classic Biblical gems: the 23rd Psalm and the Lord's Prayer. Two Scriptures we've all heard a thousand times, many of us know them by heart. The two best-known Scriptures from both sides of the Bible. Two Scriptures designed to get us through despair of any kind.

We're upset. We can't see a way forward; we can't fight ourselves out of a paper bag. The devil is nipping at our heels, the manure is piling high, the bad guys are winning, Putin is smirking from ear to ear, and not even Prague can put a smile on my face. But King David, in his 23rd Psalm, says "No" to evil and "No" to fear. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I/will/fear/no/evil," declares David.

Why? Because God's comfort, God's presence, God's goodness and mercy are so real, so true, that when God "prearest/a/table/before/me/in/the/presence of/mine/enemies," I dare to sit down, fill my plate, take my drink, and trust in the future. Psalm 23 is a Hope-builder.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus declares that our existence is lived on two planes, with the "Father who art in heaven," who, ultimately holds "the kingdom, the power, and the glory."

All that is ours, in good time. But there is also this earthly plane, where “daily bread” is in short supply, where “forgiveness” is unpopular, where “temptation” is everywhere, and where “evil” is so powerful we need God to “deliver us” from it.

Left to its own devices, Earth is a mess. But we are not left to our own devices. God is our partner in this mess. God digs through the manure with us. There’s a saying, a compliment, really, for someone you really trust: “I’d go to war with that guy.” The 23rd Psalm and the Lord’s Prayer both say that in their own way.

Whatever you must war against, whatever your struggle, whatever evil or enemy threatens us, whatever has even the power of death over us—we do not fear it. We choose Hope, and we’ll go to war with God alongside us.

Ultimately, that’s what this essay is about, isn’t it? Half the subtitle is “Despair.” But the title is “War.” And “war is hell,” even its strongest advocates warn us. They know. War is hell. War is killing and destruction and death. War is unintended consequences and collateral damage. War is economically devastating, personally brutalizing. Yet, sometimes we are “called” to war, and I use that word “called” in the Biblical sense, the spiritual sense, the Christian sense: that there’s something we must do.

Some threat, some evil becomes so horrible that we find ourselves smack up against Biblical “wisdom,” and the 1970’s folk rock classic, “Turn, Turn, Turn,” with both the Byrds and the Bible reminding us, “To everything there is a season . . . a time for war, a time for peace.”

That is not a phrase that falls easily from my lips after a lifetime of near pacifism, after a total commitment to Jesus of Nazareth, the “Prince of Peace.”

In my essay I take you through not only my struggle with prayer, but also my struggle with war. And I imagine us kneeling with George Washington in the snow at Valley Forge, praying for hope, praying for victory, praying for peace.

And I imagine us kneeling with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying for a way beyond agony, beyond violence, beyond death. “Let God’s will be done,” says Jesus. I had thought to open worship with the majestic yet challenging hymn,

*“Once to every man and nation
comes the moment to decide
in the strife of truth with falsehood
for the good or evil side.”*

That hymn would recognize the Ukraine War for what it is; and our own fears, our own despair, for what they are. The hymn dares us to choose Hope. For me, you are an ever-present sign of hope.

You choose to be an informed church, an aware church, a concerned and praying and giving church. You have immersed yourselves in my essay. You've read it, wrestled with it, responded to it. And now, in the middle of summer, you are devoting this Sunday to it. You care.

Our connection to Ukraine began with the first shot fired. We immediately thought of Leslie Nolan, a member of our Church, who served two years in Ukraine with the Peace Corps just before Covid. Her memories and contacts were fresh, and before a packed audience in the parlor, we had a video link with a young couple running a hospital for the wounded.

As the war unfolded, Ford Young, another compassionate Church member, flew to Poland, using his lifetime of international concern and expertise to get our first-hand "feel" for the heartache of war.

Then, as summer drew near, and the war rolled on, seemingly taking a turn for the worse, Bill Brennan, a deeply involved Church member, headed to Poland and Ukraine, and linked with a charity on the ground. When he got back, we had another after-church forum, again lots of people—interested, caring people who hung on his every word . . . and image. He told of aid workers and U.S. soldiers and delivering much-needed goods into Ukraine. He told us of fear and joy, of worry and faith. And Bill told us of hope.

Among his visits were to shelters in Poland for moms and kids, their husbands and fathers back in Ukraine on the front lines of war. Bill went to shelters there for a few hours, playing with the children, sharing books and toys and treats, sharing smiles and laughter, and just pure, simple, real love: the truest essence of hope.

From Bill's visit, my favorite photos are, first, one of these two really huge, scary looking security guards carrying boxes of cupcakes into a refugee camp in Lviv for a birthday party for 60 kids. The second photo, a gathering of our own U.S. Soldiers from the 82nd Airborne in Poland, there to teach, to train, to offer hope that evil can be defeated; and the last one, Bill Brennan with a bevy of little kids literally hanging all over him, his arms and legs encircled by happy children, and then one little tyke comes running straight at him, hugging him around the waist as if . . . as if holding on for dear life.

That's hope. People doing what they can. Nations doing what they can. Alliances doing what they can. Churches doing what they can. You and I, praying, praying

through it, praying through our questions, our hesitation, our doubts, our fears, our anger, praying hard, doing what we can.

That's where hope began. It did for me.

Our closing hymn today is the "Northfield Benediction."

A Benediction is a blessing, usually given by the pastor to the congregation. This summer, we will end each service by blessing one another, using the "Northfield Benediction." David attended the Northfield-Mount Herman School, founded by American Evangelist D. L. Moody. The Northfield Benediction is part of the musical tradition of that school, and based on the familiar Scripture of benediction in Numbers 6:24-26. Let's treasure this mutual blessing.

*"The Lord bless thee and keep thee,
The Lord make His face shine upon thee,
and be gracious unto thee,
And be gracious unto thee;
The Lord lift up his countenance,
His countenance upon thee,
And give thee peace!"*