

Today is the first Sunday during the period of Lent. Sundays are not actually part of the “forty days” of Lent, but we definitely observe them as Sundays of Lent — first, second, and so forth, until we get to Palm Sunday — but Lent as a season is something that I have grown to respect and generally try not to miss any of its Sundays, whether or not that makes any difference to any of you.

While we tend to characterize Lent as a season of solemnity, it was originally the time when those who were going to be baptized on Easter — what a beautiful tradition — when those to be baptized on Easter would be “instructed in,” or, to put it more positively, *were helped to grow in* their understanding and faith. But I think we probably do not look at Lent so much as an opportunity to grow our faith so much as, well, so much as a darker time for some sort of minor masochism, a bleak time of denying ourselves of something good in life, like chocolate!

And as I mentioned on Ash Wednesday, though Lent is indeed *not* a biblical concept, the Bible passages which we read on Wednesday call us not to give things up, but to take things on — take on following Christ, as in caring for others.

But right now, the gloomier aspects of Lent, indeed, the oxymoronic concept of “Good Friday” have an appropriateness to them, for to pretend that this is not a dark and precarious time in our world, to pretend that evil does not exist, evil in terms of human beings choosing to ignore God’s commandments, such denial would be not merely alarmingly naïve, but dishonest.

If there were any doubt left after the implied nuclear threat from Russian president Putin and the revelation of the unprincipled cunningness of Chinese leader Xi, the madness of shelling a Ukrainian nuclear power plant Thursday night or early Friday morning — I am not sure which it was in that time zone, — these recent and ongoing events should dispel any idea that the world is dealing with rational leaders who share the values that not only do Christians but even most atheists or agnostics share.

The government leaders of Russia and China are indeed a threat to what, again, even by non-religious politicians in Germany, have been regarded as the Christian influenced ideas and ideals that I will call *classical liberalism*, the idea and ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence once referred to as “the shot heard round the world,” even if the French Revolution ran afoul of them.

We — residents on this planet, children of God all whether we so acknowledge or not — we are in danger; we appear and perhaps are indeed imperiled on the horns of a dilemma: one that the future of the world should be controlled by selfish and evil madmen, or the other that we risk destruction of civilization in nuclear and thermo-nuclear war.

For let us not deceive ourselves, and I am not in fact criticizing the leaders of the United States or the NATO nations, for they have expressed quite clearly that they are not providing meaningful military aid to the Ukrainian people because of the fear of war between Russia and “the West,” of *nuclear* war between Russian and the West. (Distressingly because it makes it more likely that the Russians might go to nuclear war should Russia seek to do in Lithuania what it is doing in Ukraine, we can be very certain, given how overall ineffective Russia’s waging of its invasion has been, that the West would easily triumph over Russia in conventional war, though no one has even raised the issue of invading and occupying that mammoth land after any form of war.)

This dilemma is alarming. I very much believe, and I express in my pastoral prayer each Sunday, that we as Christians, most certainly in the United States, but equally in quite a number of the world’s countries, we live with the kind of freedom that I believe, especially as I read Paul’s letter to the Romans, the kind of freedom that I believe God intends for *all* the people of God — and as I repeat *ad infinitum*, everyone is a child of God; *everyone* fits into that category of “people of God.”

*What to do?* I do not know. Mind you, I am not saying that there will be nuclear war, though I think that what is being done in Ukraine puts the world into a very dark place

such that I am deeply discouraged. I am a bit of a *Russophile*, especially when it comes to classical music, literature, and Russian history. I twice traveled to Russia, once in 1995, when things looked very wonderful for the world, the second time ten years later, when Putin was first showing his hand against a domestic businessman who, from Putin's perspective, had too much independence and power. I actually discussed that particular case with the man who was — may still be — Gorbachev's translator, who expressed concern. Interestingly, and I'll never forget, I asked this man about how he had become such a *liberal*, which as I have been using it is in the Jeffersonian sense, and he responded, "'Liberal,' I guess I am. I just love freedom."

There is no question but that the leaders of the West love freedom — but maybe only for themselves, or only so far as there is no risk to themselves incurred in loving it. Maybe we are all selfish cowards at heart.

Which criticism, of course, answers nothing, but it does return us to a question, the question of *theodicy* to which I have not returned for several years: *If God is all powerful and all good, how can there be evil **such as we now are seeing** — how can there be evil in the world?*

My past week's morning devotions from my Benedictine *breviary* have included some excerpts from the Book of Job. (I had to look up what *breviary* means, *A book containing the service for each day, to be recited by those in orders in the Roman Catholic Church*, but I think you know I am anything but reluctant to recognize that we Christians of whatever denomination all worship the same Lord.)

The Book of Job, which asks the question somewhat related to the theodicy question of, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

The answer the book gives us is important though not reassuring, and the poetry merits our attention:

Job 38:1 Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:

2 "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

3 Gird up your loins like a man,  
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

Job 38:4 “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?  
Tell me, if you have understanding.

5 Who determined its measurements—surely you know!  
Or who stretched the line upon it?

6 On what were its bases sunk,  
or who laid its cornerstone

7 when the morning stars sang together  
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

Job 38:8 “Or who shut in the sea with doors  
when it burst out from the womb?—

9 when I made the clouds its garment,  
and thick darkness its swaddling band,

10 and prescribed bounds for it,  
and set bars and doors,

11 and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther,  
and here shall your proud waves be stopped’?

Job 38:12 “Have you commanded the morning since your days began,  
and caused the dawn to know its place,

13 so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,  
and the wicked be shaken out of it?

14 It is changed like clay under the seal,  
and it is dyed like a garment.

15 Light is withheld from the wicked,  
and their uplifted arm is broken.

Job 38:16 “Have you entered into the springs of the sea,

or walked in the recesses of the deep?

17 Have the gates of death been revealed to you,  
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?

18 Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?  
Declare, if you know all this.

Job 38:19 “Where is the way to the dwelling of light,  
and where is the place of darkness,  
20 that you may take it to its territory  
and that you may discern the paths to its home?  
21 Surely you know, for you were born then,  
and the number of your days is great!

Job 38:22 “Have you entered the storehouses of the snow,  
or have you seen the storehouses of the hail,  
23 which I have reserved for the time of trouble,  
for the day of battle and war?  
24 What is the way to the place where the light is distributed,  
or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth?

Job 38:25 “Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain,  
and a way for the thunderbolt,  
26 to bring rain on a land where no one lives,  
on the desert, which is empty of human life,  
27 to satisfy the waste and desolate land,  
and to make the ground put forth grass?

Job 38:28 “Has the rain a father,  
or who has begotten the drops of dew?  
29 From whose womb did the ice come forth,  
and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?

30 The waters become hard like stone,  
and the face of the deep is frozen.

Job 38:31 “Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades,  
or loose the cords of Orion?

32 Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season,  
or can you guide the Bear with its children?

33 Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?  
Can you establish their rule on the earth?

Job 38:34 “Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,  
so that a flood of waters may cover you?

35 Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go  
and say to you, ‘Here we are’?

36 Who has put wisdom in the inward parts,  
or given understanding to the mind?

37 Who has the wisdom to number the clouds?  
Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens,

38 when the dust runs into a mass  
and the clods cling together?

Job 38:39 “Can you hunt the prey for the lion,  
or satisfy the appetite of the young lions,

40 when they crouch in their dens,  
or lie in wait in their covert?

41 Who provides for the raven its prey,  
when its young ones cry to God,  
and wander about for lack of food?

In simpler English, the answer the Lord gives to Job is that “God’s ways are not human’s ways and not knowable, which is to say, *not comprehensible*, to humans.”

That is a very harsh and not comforting answer, yet without knowing of, nor indeed referring to, our Christian concept of our personal resurrection after death, the character Job at an earlier point remarks to his “friends” who are seeking convince him that the ill befalling him is evidence he must have merited God’s punishment, that,

I know that my Redeemer lives,  
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;  
26 and after my skin has been thus destroyed,  
then in my flesh I shall see God,  
27 whom I shall see on my side,  
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.  
My heart faints within me!

So how do Lent and the fear and terror and thoroughly disheartening aspects of what is happening in Ukraine and could happen in Taiwan relate?

While what God ultimately promises us through Christ does not always make life on earth better, but we do know that *what* God has promised us through Jesus, *our redeemer*, is true, and that whether it will be our eyes that behold Him, we shall indeed live resurrected with Christ, and that, to paraphrase elsewhere from Paul’s letter to the Romans, neither Putin nor Xi nor anyone else in all of creation can separate us from the love of God made known in Jesus.

Jesus, in whose name we pray, not just for ourselves, but for the entire world. Amen.