



WHAT WE CAN DO?

A sermon preached on Sunday, March 13, 2022, the Second Sunday of Lent, at Christ Church Greenwich, by Priest Associate, the Reverend Terence L. Elsberry.

I

People keep coming up to me and saying things like, I feel so helpless. I see these horrible images on the news—the death, the destruction, the misery. My heart breaks for these poor people of Ukraine. But what can I do? How can I help?

We can help financially, of course. We can support the sending of goods and services.

But isn't there more we can do?

It's the worst humanitarian crisis in Europe since the Second World War. The images are burned into our consciousness. The 84-year-old woman hobbling down the street with the help of her cane and the strong arm of a young Ukrainian soldier, and she's praying over and over: "Dear Lord Jesus, please help us survive the day. Please stop Putin from destroying us."

We see a young mother with children, kissing her husband goodbye as she takes the train to safety in Poland while he stays behind to protect their country.

We see a mother with nine children, tears running down her cheeks, imploring, "Please help us. Someone, help us."

We see a pregnant woman, her face streaked with blood, being carried on a stretcher out of a bombed maternity hospital.

We see a whole family—father, mother, children—shot.

We see the buildings blown apart, hear the screams of pain, the sobs of fear.

We see, too, the signs of bravery, the examples of resistance. Men who aren't in the military, some learning how to shoot a gun for the first time, announcing, "They will not destroy us. They will never defeat us."

We hear the words of their leader, Vladimir Zelensky. Offered a safe transport out of Ukraine he said, "I don't need a ride, I need help."

Then there's the young woman—playing a piano outside at the train station where women and children are leaving for Poland. She's playing, "What a Wonderful World." Such valor, such hope in the face of such tragedy.

But what more can WE do? What besides sending money and goods—important as these things are? Surely there must be something, something more we can do. But what is it? What can we do as heart-stricken, caring, people of God, what can you and I do for these

desperate, suffering and incredibly valiant people?

The answer is we can pray.

II

Pray? you may say. I'm already praying. There's got to be something more tangible, more concrete I can do to help these people, to alleviate their suffering, to stop the tide of evil.

When I say pray, I'm not talking about a quick prayer uttered on the way to work or going about our daily routine. I'm talking about intense, prevailing, Holy Spirit-inspired prayer. I'm talking about intercessory prayer—intercessory prayer at its most powerful.

What's intercessory prayer?

The Bible shows us certain basic kinds of prayer.

One, there's the prayer of Consecration.

On the night before He died, at supper with his disciples, Jesus took the bread. He blessed (consecrated it) and gave it to them. He did the same thing with the wine. It's what we do today: our Eucharistic prayer of consecration, when we ask the Lord to bless the elements. When a new church is built, the bishop consecrates it.

Two, there's the prayer of worship. Worship means to extol the wondrous traits of God. "Worthy art Thou, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power." (Revelation 4:11)

Three, prayers of praise and thanksgiving-- when we're thanking the Lord for what He does for us. "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow."

Four, intercessory prayer. That's the kind of prayer we need to be praying for the Ukrainian people. Intercessory prayer means to pray for the needs and concerns of others. The Old Testament term is "stand in the gap." It meant interceding for a person or a group.

Jesus interceded for His disciples. He prayed, "Holy Father, protect them . . . My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one." (John 17:11,15)

Jesus shows us intercessory prayer in action. He prayed for his people while he was here on earth. The Bible tells us he's praying for us now, in heaven.

The Apostle Paul tells the church in Ephesus to "Pray passionately in the Spirit at all times with all kinds of prayers and requests . . . always keep on praying for the Lord's people."

We need to be standing in the gap, interceding for, passionately praying for the Ukrainians.

In the early days of the church, the apostles turned managing the finances and outreach to others, so they could devote themselves to preaching, teaching, and studying the Bible and spending more time in prayer. You always hear about what a miracle it was that a relatively small handful of people could create the church in the midst of an all-powerful Pagan empire.

It WAS a miracle, but it was a miracle based on prayer, that resulted from prayer—intercessory prayer. It was intercessory prayer, along with the action of the faithful, that tapped the power of God and against all odds built the church.

Nothing we do is more important to the Lord than prayer. God gives us power for living the best lives he has for us through prayer. If God is the greatest power in the universe, our greatest power as His people comes from laying hold of Him in prayer: life-changing, miracle-producing prayer.

We need to intercede for our families and for all the people we love. We need to intercede for this church and for the church around the world. We need to intercede for our country. We need to intercede for the Ukrainian people.

James in his epistle says, "The fervent effectual prayer of a righteous person avails much." (James 6:15) The kind of prayer I'm talking about is not a hurried "God, please help these people." It's finding the time, making the space, giving the energy to—as James says—pray fervently.

Don't know what to pray, what words to use? Ask the Lord to show you. Ask Him to give you the prayers. He will. He will because He wants us to pray.

Years ago, one evening, I was sitting by myself at dusk on a beach on the Gulf coast of Florida. And I prayed that prayer. I said, "Lord, show me what you want me to pray for."

Within a matter of minutes, a series of people's faces came through my mind. Face after face. They were the faces of people I'd never seen. Complete strangers. And I began to pray for them. It's never happened again, but it was for me glittering proof that not only does the Lord want us to pray, he's always right here to show us HOW to pray.

III

What sets this situation in Ukraine apart from most things we pray for is that here we are confronted with the harsh reality of evil. Our prayers of intercession now need to be directed against the forces of evil that would destroy innocent people and children and an entire nation.

Most of don't like to think about evil. Satan is not a popular subject for polite conversation or, frankly, for sermons. But that's what we're dealing with here: abject evil.

Paul hits it head on. He tells the church in Ephesus: "Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil."

"For," Paul says, "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers against the forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness." (Ephesians 6:11-12) It's the forces of wickedness that are trying to destroy Ukraine.

That's why—believe it or not—we need to pray for Putin. Pray God will deliver him of the evil that possesses him. Only pure evil could call for the bombing of a maternity clinic, kill little children, attempt to destroy an entire nation. We're talking wanton acts of incomprehensible evil. These are satanic acts. In today's Gospel we see Jesus praying for people to be healed and delivered from demons. Putin needs to be delivered from the evil that possesses him, that drives him to acts of such monstrous cruelty.

Paul concludes that we can counter such evil forces, we can even eventually defeat them (implacable and all-powerful though they may seem) with "prayer and petition, praying at all times in the Spirit." (Verse 18)

What's it mean when Paul adjures us to pray in the Spirit? It means to ask God to give us the prayers He wants us to pray and then empower our prayers by His Spirit. That's when we can find our way to victory. That's one of the reasons He gave us the Holy Spirit, so we won't have to live as totally vulnerable, defenseless people. He gives us the power BY His Spirit. He gives us the power in His name. That's why we pray to God for our prayers to be answered. We pray to the Father, in the name of Jesus, by the power of the Spirit.

We're very fortunate here at Christ Church to have an intercessory prayer team. Led by Sarah Boyle, they pray for the prayer needs we send to them. They are powerful in prayer. We thank them, we bless them for carrying out this vital, this crucial ministry of prayer. If you want to join this happy band of prayer warriors, contact Sarah.

But Christ Church, no church, is ever going to do its best, become all the Lord wants it to be, without more and more of us praying. Praying for each other. Praying for our church. Praying for our nation. Praying now for Ukraine.

Let's begin today. As the people of God in this place and in these fraught times, let's make a covenant agreement to pray more—to seek the Holy Spirit's help in praying against the evil taking place in Ukraine and in the world, including this country.

But none of this is going to happen without our fervent and committed prayer.

A great man of the early church, Archbishop of Constantinople John Chrysostom, described the power of prayer in these words:

"The potency of prayer has subdued the strength of fire. It has bridled the rage of lions, hushed anarchy to rest, extinguished wars, appeased the elements, expelled demons, burst the chains of death, expanded the gates of heaven, assuaged disease, repelled frauds, rescued cities from destruction, stayed the sun in its course, and arrested the progress of the thunderbolt. Prayer is an all-efficient panoply, a treasure undiminished, a mine which is never exhausted, a sky unobscured by clouds, a heaven unruffled by the storm. It is the root, the fountain, the mother of a thousand blessings.

I can't quit thinking about the young woman at the Kiev train station playing and singing, "It's A Wonderful World." Wonderful. That's what the world is in those times and in those places where our God reigns. May Ukraine one day be such a place. May our prayers help it come to pass.