

2 Lent 2020

Almighty God, during this Lenten season, we come before you humbled and sorrowful, aware of our sin, and ready to repent. Lord, forgive us for we have sinned before you. Wash away our sins and purify us. Lead us to walk in your way, leaving behind our old lives and starting a new life in you. All this we pray through your Son Jesus Christ, who came to save us from our sins. Amen.

Just over 30 years ago, the wall between East and West Germany came down, and shortly after, came the dismantling of the Soviet Union. Although primarily viewed as a political milestone, there is part of the story that I at least was not aware of.

In 1992, a group of scholars, from United Theological Seminary, traveled to Moscow to participate in the first truly free May Day celebrations since 1917. Why was May 1st so important? According to Encyclopedia.com, "May Day was celebrated with great fervor in the USSR and its client states. As elsewhere, it was a public holiday with demonstrations of worker solidarity, but with the onset of the Cold War, it increasingly became a propaganda show for Soviet technological achievements and military might. In Red Square, troops paraded their latest military hardware in front of huge, stage-managed crowds. Presidents of friendly regimes were invited to inspect the parades and, under effigies of Socialist heroes such as Vladimir Lenin and Karl Marx, synchronized demonstrations of dance, music, and flag waving took place. The Soviet leadership also choreographed their May Day parades as statements on contemporary global politics. In 1963, shortly after the Cuban missile crisis, May Day was a defiant show of military and technological might, in which the latest weaponry was paraded through Red Square. By the late 1960s, with mounting criticism across the world of America's role in the Vietnam War, the May Day parades increasingly became a demonstration of solidarity with the Viet-Cong." This is not the May Day that I knew growing up with dancing around a maypole in elementary school.

The group from United Theological Seminary was comprised mostly of pastors from some of the largest churches in America and Korea. They were able to arrange a private interview with Mikhail Gorbachev, himself. A new day was dawning in Russian history. While the focus of the conversation was on the new day, they could not let pass the opportunity to ask Gorbachev the question on everyone's mind: Why, in his personal opinion, did communism collapse?

A member of the group stated: "We had studied in advance the various explanations for the collapse of Communism: - it was economically inefficient; it proved incapable of expanding the forces of production because of its obsessive geopolitical and military competition with the advanced capitalist powers; and it was a brutally cruel and virulently offensive system to its supposed beneficiaries - human beings.

A remarkably charming and candid Gorbachev gave his explanation. There were two distinct reasons, he argued. First, Gorbachev admitted that the Soviet Union under the communist regime had committed ecocide. Ecocide involves far more than simply pollution or natural resource mismanagement. Gorbachev recognized that the root of much of communism's botched attempt to govern, came from its failure to respect the natural principles of life. Economics, employment, food supplies, a cohesive infrastructure - all these grow out of a natural life-sustaining base that must be kept in balance. By ignoring that base and kicking it away, the communist system eventually crumbled under its own unsupported weight".

We need to keep in mind that Gorbachev had been the leader and most powerful official of an atheistic country. As I read the article, Gorbachev's second reason for communism's

collapse was even more surprising. Communism, Gorbachev admitted, did not take seriously "the spiritual principle of man."

Gorbachev felt that communism was only adept at understanding the physical, materialist side of life and could not comprehend the spiritual side of existence! "We need spiritual values; we need a revolution of the mind" he said to the group. He had given a similar message to Pope John Paul II when they met. "We must find a way to stimulate the spiritual principle in man."

This is not something that I expected to hear from this Russian leader. And I know that it surprised the group of pastors also.

The Berlin wall came down in 1989. This had been preceded by civil resistance in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria. The Soviet Union dissolved in December 1991.

Then Secretary of State James A. Baker, III said in Feb 1990; ""Could it be that a major meaning of the revolution going on in Eastern Europe is the resurgence or rebirth of faith? ... Vaclav Havel, the new president of Czechoslovakia, recently told his countrymen that 'the most important problem they were facing was a decayed moral environment, devoid of belief, consideration, compassion, humility and forgiveness.'"

This makes sense. I think that it also makes sense in relation to our Gospel reading this morning.

There is little evidence that Nicodemus being a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews and a teacher of Israel, would have spoken out to the Jewish Leaders, that their system of local government was repressive to the Jewish people. Jesus, on the other hand, **continually**

professed a need for renewal and this brought him constant negative attention and eventually his death. The Jewish people had a very long history of needing renewal and spent a lot of time wandering away from their spiritual connection to God.

Jesus made the following observation to Nicodemus; “⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” The Israelites constantly wandered away from their spiritual roots. A fact that they were reminded of by Moses and the prophets. While wandering through the wilderness, the people of Israel had once again fallen into the predictable pattern of impatient whining and bitter grumbling against God and Moses. So, the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, killing many. Panic-stricken, the people came to Moses and confessed, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." Hearing this confession and feeling compassion for his people, God came up with an innovative healing device. "Make a poisonous serpent," the LORD said to Moses, "and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So, Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it on a pole, and sure enough: Whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live (Numbers 21:4-9).

The reference to Moses' bronze serpent in Numbers 21:9 calls to mind for Nicodemus yet another Old Testament image as a referent. Nicodemus would have been very aware of this reference in the Book of Numbers.

All those Israelites who gazed upon that raised serpent were themselves saved from a deadly serpent's bite. Jesus was saying that he would soon be that uplifted, saving image for

all humanity. But note that more is required of those who would be saved by the crucified Christ than was expected of the Israelites. While the afflicted Israelite had only to look upon the bronze image raised for their sake, those who would be born again, those who would truly make a difference, must **believe** in the salvation made available by Christ's death and resurrection. This is the spiritual renewal, the new order that Jesus speaks about. This is what is expected of those who are born again of water and the spirit.

We are left with the assumption that Nicodemus upon hearing the words of Jesus, snuck away into the night just as he had come. We don't know for sure. But whether he realized it or not, he had received the good news from Jesus that very night.

The team of pastors and scholars also received good news that day in 1992. The day after meeting with Gorbachev, they met with the Russian equivalent of a public-school principal. Even though Russian schools were officially closed for the May Day holidays, this principal gathered all her teachers and staff together to meet with them and ask for their help. The amazing part is what they asked for. Here is what they said; "The principal began by acknowledging that we had by now no doubt noticed the Russian people were not as well dressed or as well fed as Westerners. "But was it not your Jesus, " she asked, "who responded to the question 'When did we see you hungry, when did we see you naked?' with 'Inasmuch as you have done it for the least of these you've done it for me?'"

She continued, "In spite of what you think, we are not naked - we have enough clothes. We are not hungry - we have enough food. We are rich in culture and tradition. But we are hungry and we are naked and poor for the things of the spirit - joy, happiness, peace,

patience. This is where we need your help and your churches' help most desperately! Help make us rich in the things of the spirit."

Here was a public-school principal charged with providing formally atheistic education, in an officially atheistic state, recognizing that the only thing capable of clearing the stagnant air from her students' futures was the breath of God's Spirit. Moreover, she was opening the windows and the doors of her school to this unknown group of religious leaders, trusting that we would help direct the gusts of new life through those hallways. Nobody had to tell the people who had lived under communism that the system had left them spiritually and materially worse off than they ever have been. They had long known that they were living in a hollow spiritless structure that needed only one good wind to knock it over.

As they drove through Moscow, they encountered profound evidence of this rampant spiritual expectancy. Huge May Day banners draped over the streets and hung on buildings proclaimed in Russian "Christ Is Risen! " At Red Square itself, where on previous May Days the communist regime had strutted its military prowess for all the world to see, May Day 1992 looked very different. Some of the biggest posters, some of the loudest music, some of the longest speeches were on the theme, "Christ Is Risen!" How ironic that secular society in the Commonwealth of Independent States was more open to Christianity than secular society in America. I don't think that things have changed a whole lot over the past 28 years. That needs to change. But here is a little more good news:

Two years before their collapse, the Communist Party called a special meeting. For 55 minutes a Marxist philosopher lectured on why communism was officially atheistic and why there is no God.

When the official was finished most of the people simply stood with folded arms. A few applauded nervously. Then a Russian Orthodox priest was brought to the podium and told he had three minutes for his response. The priest began his response by saying he did not need three minutes. He only needed three words. The three words were these, shouted at the top of his lungs: "Christ is risen!"

And the great assembly responded back, "Christ is risen indeed!" Again, the priest called out, "Christ is risen!" And again, the people replied, "Christ is risen indeed!" For a third time this priest cried to this crowd of party bureaucrats, "Christ is risen!" For a third time they shouted in unison, "Christ is risen indeed!" And with that the priest fumed from the podium and resumed to his seat.

We will proclaim those same words in a few weeks on Easter. During this season of Lent, we're not asked to look up at a serpent on a pole, but a Savior on a cross. God says, "Look up ... and believe! Look at my Son, who died so that you might live. Everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life" (3:16). And through our belief we are saved.

AMEN