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Again We Keep this Solemn Fast
Genesis 2: 7-9, 15-25 | Matthew 4: 1-11

This week marked one year since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In fact on this Sunday last year - the first Sunday of Lent - the lectionary appointed the same text from the second Creation story in Genesis that we read today, and I was so horrified by the siege of major Ukrainian cities like Kiev and Kharkev that I preached a whole sermon about the war. Here we are one year hence, again on the first Sunday of Lent, and I don't see how we can receive the mark of ashes - "remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" - without identifying with the dust and ashes raining all over the breadbasket of Europe.

American churches do lots of little gimmicks for Ash Wednesday. "Drive In Ashes," somebody posted at Plymouth Church in Des Moines last week. "Pull into the traffic circle outside the church office and receive the gift of ashes from the comfort of your vehicle." We try to make it convenient for folks, too - to drop in on their lunch hour or come by after work. Truth be told I finally ran short of my supply of ashes this year, so I had to make some more. I took the left over fronds from Palm Sunday last year out to my backyard and lit them up over the grill. But you know I doubt that many Christian pastors in Ukraine this year were standing out in their back yards barbecuing their old palm branches. And I can't imagine that they were pleading with their congregants to just drive by and receive the gift of ashes. Smoke is in the air; the soil is stained with blood; the ashes are falling from the sky.

Since the war began a year ago, the United Church of Christ, our denomination, has raised more than \$3 million for Ukrainian relief. These funds are distributed largely through historic partnerships that our church maintains with other congregations. A core value of our global mission work is what we call "critical presence," which basically means that we try to bring ourselves closer to the communities where we have partnerships so that we can develop mutual relationships, trusting that those who are present to communities have the greatest means for meeting needs. So in addition to sending money to communities impacted by the war, our church recently sent a delegation to visit our partners in the region. A small group of church folks spent nearly two weeks touring refugee communities in Hungary, Moldova, and Greece, and even ventured into western Ukraine, a region known as Transcarpathia, where there is no active fighting but still a great deal of suffering caused by the demands of the war. One of the delegates said that the purpose of the tour was simply for "showing up and maintaining hope."

In Western Ukraine, they observed how the war was transforming the country even many hundreds of miles away from the front. All men between the ages of 18 and 60 are being pressed into military service. Men unable or unwilling to serve have either fled the country or they're in hiding, some spending their days hiding in haystacks to avoid conscription. If they have managed to remain in Ukraine without joining the armed forces, they have likely been displaced and they are unable to work to provide for their families. Among our congregation's primary partners in the region are the Reformed Church in Hungary and the Reformed Church in Transcarpathia, both of which have developed innovative missions to serve refugees and displaced people. I read that in one community, the church established a temporary home for displaced people in a local fire station. In another case, the regional church created a home for seniors, including many with dementia and other age-related illnesses, because there are so many families now unable to care

for elders. The deacons of the regional church also run ministries for baking bread, running soup kitchens, and delivering firewood through the cold winter. Across the border in Moldova, the delegation observed how the incursion of more than 800,000 Ukrainian refugees was affecting regional neighbors. Many refugees, perhaps as many as 25,000, are staying in the homes of Moldovan citizens. Neighbors across national borders have opened their homes to each other. Other refugees are living in larger camps that have been established around the region. Some of the funding that the United Church of Christ has raised goes to support distribution centers where people can get clothes, shoes, diapers, and other necessities. These centers are often supported by Church World Service, so if you've made a gift through our congregation, say, to the Alternative Gift Market, those dollars may have found their way to a refugee services center in Moldova or perhaps in Greece, where our delegation also met large refugee populations.

Not all of us are able to participate in such a pilgrimage of solidarity to visit with the Ukrainian people whose lives have been turned upside down by this war, nor would it be appropriate for us all to put ourselves at the center of their story if we did have the ability to travel as this delegation from the church did. But as we begin the season of Lent, it seems to me that the spiritual disciplines of this time may be one way for "showing up and maintaining hope." Fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are special observances that many of us may take on in this season - and in some way they are all meant to bring us closer to Christ. We don't have to fly to Budapest necessarily to show our solidarity with the Ukrainians. We can just as well join them in prayer and offer what we can to ministries that touch their experience. The dust and ashes are signs of our humility; they speak of our mortality. So it is a measure of our faith simply to remember, despite our distance and our privilege, we might just as well be covered in soot falling from the sky. Let the ashes of Lent make us one with each other, a common sign of our humanity. If they speak of death, it is a death shared with Christ, in whom we can see the faces of all God's children. With such simple observances as these, we come closer to Christ and to our neighbor. However we keep our solemn fasts during Lent, let it not just be a private good for ourselves, but let us do it to be in closer presence and solidarity with our neighbors.