

Sermon for 27 February 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
Transfiguration Sunday

Scriptures: Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99(UM819); 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:38-43a

“Close to the edge”

Steady as she goes...

Even though the world is watching the closest thing to war in Europe since 1945, the church goes on with its yearly story, as we turn a corner completely, from Christmas and its sequel of Epiphany, and a brief stretch of ordinary time, and face, today, the highest point we will see until Easter morning.

This next Wednesday we will enact the ritual of Ash Wednesday, and solemnly start the longest meditative season of personal and group reflection of the whole Christian Year, the season of Lent.

Serious business is our motif now: Each one of us in our own daily way, and Sundays together with our dear ones in the body of believers ... our Bethesda sisters and brothers.

Take a deep breath and get ready to use this discipline of Lent as thoughtfully and sincerely as you ... as we ... can. It is one of God's gifts. We are in training ... always in training with Jesus, we Christians ... and this is study time in its own special way.

To prepare for this intense season, we're given Transfiguration Sunday today. However it came to be, however the words describing it became part of our treasurehouse we call the Bible, this Sunday shows a few of Jesus' close friends, and Jesus, experiencing the flame, or the dark, or whatever you can think of as "up close," "almost," "nearer than you can imagine" ... however what most matters comes alive to us as human beings. For just a short, unforgettable while, both the disciples and Jesus himself looked up, looked within, saw and listened and spoke as strangers who know one another better than people ever know one another, and understood in a bodily way what truth was.

And then it was gone Life went on ...

I chose this title, "Close to the edge," last Sunday evening ... but I didn't expect it to fit so profoundly into our present moment. Just as our friends from Owings, Maryland, spoke to us last Sunday about the blight of suicide in the country of Kenya, so this Sunday we are talking and thinking about war, and how it already is ruining the lives of people in Ukraine and Russia and all the surrounding region ... and "Close to the Edge" not only means

deep into the experience of religious faith, as I intended it to mean, but into the threat of nuclear war and all the craziness we mostly ignore in our time, but that we know makes us unlike any other generation in terms of uncertainty and danger past description.

I didn't know how emotional the newspaper headlines would make me last Friday morning. I found myself weeping and grieving more than I almost ever do as I went about fixing my breakfast. I've been watching war all my life. I listened with my Dad to Hitler on the radio. My brothers marched off to war and came back whole but changed. Then there was Korea, then Vietnam It seemed for awhile there to me that there'd been nothing but war ... and my God! What sad idiocy it always is!

So now, today, we have getting close to religion for our topic, and we have facing all the hype about war in our present moment of history. As far as how we deal with it, it sure doesn't help just to call Putin a fool and shake our heads. In our very own Baltimore Sunpaper Friday, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman taught us how, idiotic as Putin is, we're not innocent bystanders in this story. He cites George Kennan, arguably the most wise of observers of our foreign policy towards Russia from the 1920's through the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of Soviet Russia in 1989, in Kennan's belief how ridiculously and shamefully we and all those nations in the West who held power with us, left Russia hanging out to dry in that moment ... how Russia wasn't all that experienced with democracy, but she was more developed in that direction than all those nations she'd dominated under Stalin and Khrushchev.... And how the opportunity to work with the former Soviet Union was just allowed to slip by, and now, eventually, here we are in this much more difficult scenario, And we even elected as president a guy, Trump, who now says Putin is smart for what he's doing.

We're near the edge.

The Bible gives us many stories and techniques for dealing with reality in life's deepest moments. Along with that, church fellowship, and the disciplines of prayer and good works, all give us tools and training for moments, like this one, when things are different than they've ever been, and when there's all sorts of temptation to blame the other fellow, or just turn off the news and act like nothing's up to us. But as I preached to the early service last Sunday, if we don't do the best we can to love ourselves and each other, and work as much with the bigger matters like votes and social policies, and leaving things better than we found them, when everything's falling apart as obviously as it is all around us right now, we've missed the message. This is real. This is life. This is salvation. This is our moment to love and hope and grow in Jesus Christ our Lord. This is the deal. This is the bargain God is always offering us, all up and down the

line. Let's work with the Spirit who lives and breathes and moves among us, right now, right here. Amen.