

# *Resurrection Hope in the Midst of the “Devil’s Moment”*

## A Holy Week Reflection

BY THE RT. REV. PAUL-GORDON CHANDLER

Today we are entering what we call the Holy Triduum, three weighty momentous days, beginning with what we call Maundy Thursday and ending on Resurrection Sunday.

It has been devastating over the last month and a half to observe what is happening in Ukraine. While cities and villages like Kyiv, Bucha, Mariupol and Kharkiv are on the other side of the world, the unjust war there has touched hearts, both near and far. Just this last Sunday, Passion Sunday, while in Laramie, I saw an enormous lighted sign at the university of the Ukraine’s flag colors, blue and gold, with our own Wyoming Bucking Horse & Rider trademark on it. These last months have been filled with devastation and horror. The world is just now beginning to see the extent of the Russian leadership’s campaign of terror against Ukrainian civilians. Watching the news is heart wrenching, and at times almost unbearable. It is a “heart-hurting” time to be commemorating Holy Week, let alone to celebrate Easter. As U2’s Bono sings in one of their songs, “A heart that hurts is a heart that beats.” It is a dark time in our world.



One of my favorite artists is the contemporary painter Daniel Bonnell who is based in Savannah, Georgia. His paintings are intensely moving and touch the viewer at a deep existential level. Having suffered extensively himself, he is able to powerfully capture the depth of emotion around Christ’s suffering during what we now call Holy Week.

One of his paintings particularly stands out to me at this particular time. It is a dark painting, with only muted hues of black, grey and orange. The focal point is the shadow on the ground of Christ on the cross. There is a group of grieving onlookers wearing mourning clothes in the background. In the midst of the ominous dark sky, one sees a skull-like image in the tempestuous clouds looking down upon the scene. Bonnell appropriately titled the painting *The Devil’s Moment*.

*The Devil’s Moment*  
by Daniel Bonnell (2003)  
Oil on canvas

For many in our world, such as millions of our sisters and brothers in Ukraine, it can seem like it is truly “evil’s moment,” when destruction and death are all that seem on offer, and where in so many ways Christ is being crucified once again. Yet, in the midst of their tragic suffering, they have much to teach us. The other day on the news I watched a short video taken on a mobile phone of a small group of Christians gathered in an Orthodox Church in Bucha, Ukraine, where in the churchyard, a couple days before, a mass grave had been discovered of civilians massacred by Russian Armed Forces during their withdrawal from the city. The shaky video footage was spiritually haunting. As the priest chanted in the dim candlelit church, cloudy from incense, the tiny group of worshippers sang responses that were paradoxically filled with both agony and hope. That short amateur clip captured the enigma of the Ukrainian Christians at this time, and the paradox of our faith. Those worshippers, who in the midst of a living horror, are what the late renowned theologian Jaroslav Pelikan once described as “public evidence for a mystery.”



Image: Anastasia Vlasova / Stringer / Getty  
*Crosses in a mass grave near the church in Bucha, Ukraine.*

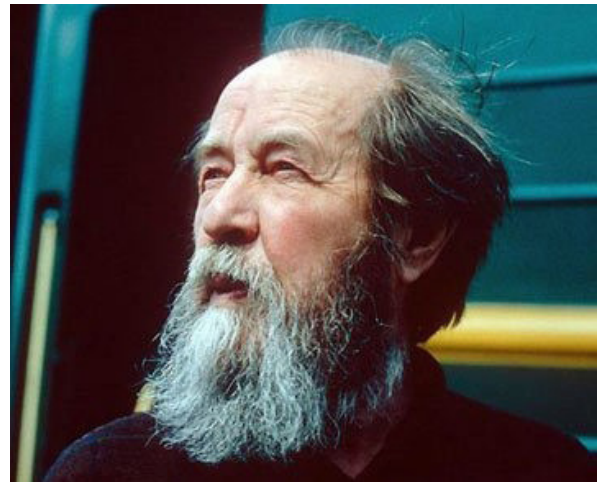
I recall experiencing the sense of never-ending hope when I visited Ukraine numerous times between late 1990-1993, the early days of Ukrainian independence after the fall of the former Soviet Union. I was there to assist both the Orthodox and Protestant Churches in their publishing of the Bible in the Ukrainian language. During those visits, I had the honor of attending numerous worship services, from tiny house churches in the countryside to the breathtakingly majestic St. Sophia’s Cathedral in the capital city of Kyiv. I recall attending a worship service in a small old rundown wooden house, where the worshippers were largely “babushkas” and “dedushkas,” elderly Ukrainians who had lived through the Soviet era. The lines on their wrinkled faces told stories of lives of hardship and suffering. Yet, as they sang their soulful hymns, broke together a large loaf of bread, and passed around a tarnished silver communion cup, I was overwhelmed, for hope overflowed from these worshippers. It was clear they had experienced God’s presence all along the borders of hell throughout their lives.

I am reminded of the life of Jurgen Moltmann, one of the premier theologians of the 20th century whose writings have had a profound impact on my life. In his short book, *Experiences of God*, he recounts his personal journey toward hope. Sent to the German front as a young man in WW II, he was soon captured by the British. He spent the next three years in prison camps, shuttled from one to another - in Belgium, Scotland and England. He really had no Christian background. But a chaplain gave him a New Testament with the Psalms. "If I made my bed in hell, you are there," Moltmann read from the Psalms in the prison camp. Could God be present in that dark night? As he read the Psalms, he found words that perfectly captured his own feelings of desolation. And he became convinced that God "was present even behind the barbed wire - no, most of all behind the barbed wire." Walking the perimeter of the barbed wire at night for exercise, he would circle a small hill in the center of camp on which stood a hut that served as a chapel. For him the hut became a symbol of God's presence radiating in the midst of suffering, and out of that symbol grew hope. Upon release, instead of continuing his plan to study quantum physics, he turned to theology, founding a theological movement called a "theology of hope."

This season we are reminded that hope is the foundation upon which our faith rests. As Jesus reminds us, "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." He even refers to us "children of resurrection." So much of the Scriptures are a compilation of stories of God rescuing women and men out of seemingly impossible situations. Easter is all about the Eternal One rescuing humanity and all of God's creation. Yes, for Ukrainians, and many others, it seems like the "devil's moment." But Easter reminds us that our journeys are not to the grave, but through it. As St. Augustine of Hippo so boldly declared, back in the early 5th century, "We are an Easter people, and 'Alleluia' is our song." How apropos it is for the magnificent Patriarchal Cathedral of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church in Kyiv to be named the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ.

This is the week when we who follow Christ remember his suffering and death, and in so doing we are reminded that God descends into our world of pain and hardship, and suffers with us. However, thanks be to God, it does not end there. For this is also the week that leads to the Resurrection, where God promises a hope beyond any despair.

I close with a prayer written by the late Russian novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn. He was exiled for many years from the former Soviet Union, after having spent 8 years in Stalin's Gulag. He went on to become the most respected contemporary Russian author of the 20th century. In 1970 he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He wasn't allowed to attend the ceremony in Stockholm, Sweden, so he sent his speech by mail. And he ended his address with this very personal prayer.



How easy it is to live with You, O Lord  
How easy to believe in You.  
When my spirit is overwhelmed within me,  
When even the keenest see no further than the night.  
And know not what to do tomorrow,  
You bestow on me the certitude  
That you exist and are mindful of me,  
That all the paths of righteousness are not barred.  
As I ascend into the hill of earthly glory,  
I turn back and gaze, astonished, on the road  
That led me here beyond despair.