O Lord,

The house of my soul is narrow;

enlarge it that you may enter in.

It is ruinous, O repair it!

It displeases Your sight.

I confess it, I know.

But who shall cleanse it,

to whom shall I cry but to you?

Cleanse me from my secret faults, O Lord,

and spare Your servant from strange sins.

Getting up to preach an Ash Wednesday sermon in any given year has always seemed to me a remarkable feat of pastoral hubris, even more so than most things I do as a sinner *and* a Christian priest. How maddeningly inconsistent, it seems, that I would have the gall to tell a group of people to enter into a season of penitence and spiritual rigor when I know the affairs of my own wandering heart.

Given the state of the world as we see it on the news these days, how much more absurd it seems to get up into this lovely pulpit and extol the virtues of giving up Oreos and junk food for our Lenten discipline. After a couple of years of plague and now a very troubling war in Eastern Europe, the interior work of the Christian practice of Lent can seem insignificant, like a sneeze in a tornado.

At least that's how I was feeling earlier last week as I was watching some of the same news I suspect you were, glued to some of same videos of the conflict that the world was sharing over and over. But within the videos of broken bodies and vehicles, busted up homes and human displacement, I saw something that moved me greatly. I saw a video of a small group of people praying. They weren't overly exuberant, there wasn't anything particularly interesting or arresting about the video save that it depicted several Ukrainians with eyes closed and hands folded in prayer. It was a simple and effective reminder that my hubris is probably found in my fatalism; that if those facing down and invading army can find a moment to pray in earnestness, then surely I can encourage a congregation to observe an holy Lent, to abide by the Church's rule of prayer, to emulate Jesus in humility and service, and to offer the world a vision of hope and love of which it seems so desperately bereft.

Indeed, the past few years have reminded us of our frailty; reminded us that even with all of the modern contrivances with which we pretend to seal ourselves, we are after all, dust. I think Ash Wednesday punctuates that lesson annually, as when I administer the ashes, I solemnly remind the owner of the ashen forehead that unto dust shalt they return. The thing is, the entire liturgy of Ash Wednesday is not completed in the administration of the ashes. If one were to only receive ashes and then split, one would not completely imbibe of the entire message of the day. The news, our lives, well they can remind us of our human limits every single day. But here, after the ashes, we stubbornly offer the prayers of the Holy Eucharist. Against that which binds us in our flesh, we pray thanksgiving to God for all that he has done, and we remember in our prayers all that He has done to save us in His Son, the Messiah, Jesus. This morning, we will have once again accepted that we are dust; but we will also proclaim that in Jesus Christ, we can count on God to raise us to new life, and even to imbue our mortal, dusty natures with his life, light, and love. We will invite Christ's own dear presence into our very bodies at the sacrament of the Altar thus moving us, I pray to the recognition that despite the fact that we are but dust, God's goodness and power will animate our hearts towards being much more than ash on a forehead, much more indeed.

Thus, we are invited into a Holy Lent. We are invited to a threefold rule of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving and in that 40 day plus Sundays pattern, we pray that God would transform us even a little bit, conforming us into the pattern of Jesus; again much more than smudges of dirt. The chocolates, the sweets, or whatever we have set aside for our Lenten abstention, those are the gateways into a deeper Lenten life. I pray that especially this year, when we are unsettled by news and life in general, that we would make particular time for prayer, awaiting God's transforming love among us by way of our address to Him. Let us be found in prayer so that we can more readily address the challenges of our lives with virtue and grace, and more ably attend to the affairs of the world with the same. As always, I pray that I would be a resource to you in that regard, as much my job as a priest is to help train and equip the saints by encouraging healthy spirituality. Thank you for the blessing of being able to walk through this Lenten season with you, beloved.

To God be all glory, from age to age. Amen.