



From the Pulpit: March 20, 2022

Third Sunday in Lent

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Ephesians 6:10–17

Lent in Plain Sight, IV: Shoes

As you've heard we're preaching this sermon series during Lent called *Lent In Plain Sight* where we find the sacred in ordinary objects. So far we've covered dust, bread, coins, and today is shoes.

Paul says that in a broken world, "we do not contend with enemies of flesh and blood, but with cosmic powers of this present darkness, and spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places."

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day. Fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Wow that is lofty, spooky, eccentric vocabulary for twenty-first-century ears. Paul's sketch of an unseen world of powers, principalities, demons, and devils is somewhere between quaint and obsolete, but if he's right about that extraterrestrial world, we will need an unearthly arsenal to confront it.

“Paul also tells us to put on shoes that will guide you into the way of peace. Shoes are quite as important to St. Paul as to Carrie Bradshaw, but he thinks they matter. Be vigilant about where your shoes take you, he wants to say.”

So he says, “Gird yourself with the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of God's word. If it was St. Paul who wrote that, he wrote it near the end of his life from prison in Rome, literally chained to a Roman centurion armored in a World Wrestling belt, a coat of mail, a crested helmet, a formidable shield, and a bristling sword. You can see why he would use such a vivid image.

There's some doubt about whether it was actually St. Paul who wrote the *Letter to the Ephesians*, but just for fun, let's assume it was he who scrawled what some have called “The Queen of the Epistles”.

Paul also tells us to put on shoes that will guide you into the way of peace. Shoes are quite as important to St. Paul as to Carrie Bradshaw, but he thinks they matter. Be vigilant about where your shoes take you, he wants to say.

So I've been thinking about shoes in Kyiv and Moscow. Russian army boots stampeding through the city streets wreaking havoc on the innocent. Baby shoes littering Independence Square. Refugees in Nikes running west. Vladimir Putin's preternaturally puny size seven Gucci's. But also Polish shoes racing east to the border to welcome three million displaced persons. Be vigilant about where your shoes take you.

As of this morning, you have donated \$4,700 to UNICEF for relief in Ukraine through Kenilworth Union Church. From the many worthy relief agencies we could have selected, we chose UNICEF first of all because this Church has supported UNICEF for as long as even Gil Bowen can remember. It's the only agency I know of that has its own stained-glass window in our church.

But there's another good reason to support UNICEF. They are uniquely positioned to help because they have had boots on the ground in Ukraine long before this catastrophe. Wonderful expression—boots on the ground. Boots where it matters when it matters. Be vigilant about where your shoes take you.

Until February 24, Anna was an actor in Kyiv. She's 38 years old. Now she packs medical supplies for injured soldiers and civilians. "We need tourniquets" she says.

She admits to being afraid. "I am afraid of what I cannot control" she says "and of what I can't run away from. I am afraid the sky will rain down fire. I am afraid my home will be destroyed." But fleeing the capital she says, has never entered her mind. "This is my home. It wasn't an option for me."¹ Be vigilant about where your shoes take you.

Until February 24, Alona was a professional make-up artist in Kyiv. She's 32. She practiced her craft for stage and screen and concerts. Now she cares for the wounded.

When somebody asked her how her cosmetology career prepared her for such a brutal task, she answers, "I'm not afraid to touch faces, eyes, or wounds. I'm not afraid of blood."

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Alona is known for two things: her assault rifle, and her Doc Marten boots, always unlaced. War doesn't mean giving up style, she says. "Throughout Ukrainian history" she says, "it's always been men who protect the country. That's not fair. I want to help."² Be vigilant about where your Doc Martens take you.

One last thing and then I'll quit. This story starts in Poland, about 100 miles from the Ukraine border. This story is about Kurt Klein and Gerda Weissmann. I first learned about Gerda and Kurt at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.³

Not long after Kurt Klein's bar mitzvah in Walldorf, Germany, in 1934 or 1935, things were getting bad for European Jews. So Kurt taught himself English by reading about America; when he was 16, his father sent him to the States. Kurt arrived in Buffalo, New York, with \$10 in his pocket, and supported himself by washing dishes and selling cigars. In 1942 Kurt became a U.S. soldier and went right back to Europe to fight against his **old** country for his **new** country.

² Siobhán O'Grady and Kostiantyn Khudov, "Ukrainian Women Stand Strong Against Russian Invaders," *The Washington Post*, March 20, 2022.

³ What follows are Gerda Weissmann's memories, shared in the HBO/USHMM film, "One Survivor Remembers," 1995. <https://www.ushmm.org/remember/days-of-remembrance/resources/one-survivor-remembers>

¹ "Citizens of Kyiv," photo essay in *The New York Times Magazine*, text by C.J. Chivers, photographs by Alexander Chekmenev, March 20, 2022.

Meanwhile over in Bielsko, Poland, in June of 1942, another Jewish kid, Gerda Weissmann, was just turning 18 years old. Her family got a notice from the Nazis: "Pack up; you're not living in Bielsko anymore."

Gerda's father asked, "Gerda, where are your ski boots?" Gerda said "Ski boots! Father, it's June; it's hot; I don't need my ski boots." Father said, "Get your ski boots." Gerda never disobeyed her father.

Gerda was taken to a series of work camps in eastern Germany, along the German-Polish border. She spent three years in these work camps. She wore her ski boots every day.

By January of 1945, it was clear that Germany was going to lose the war; the SS did not want to become war criminals; they did not want the Americans and the Russians to know what they'd been up to at Buchenwald and Auschwitz, so in January of 1945, they began closing down the camps, and marching the POW's deeper into the German interior.

Gerda was one of 2,000 women and girls who were marched 350 miles for three months—February, March, and April—in bitter cold, without food. Along the way some starved, some froze, some were shot. By the end of April, the SS guards escorting the women left them in an abandoned Czech bicycle factory and fled the approaching Americans and Russians.

Of the 2,000 women who began the march in January, 150 were still alive; Gerda was one who made it, partly because of her boots. "Now I know why, on a warm June day three years before, my father insisted I wear my boots. Some girls had only sandals; I saw toes snap off like twigs in the cold."

Gerda was 21 years old; she weighed 68 pounds; her hair was as white as the snow at her feet.

The women stayed at the bicycle factory for the next few days—too weak to move and nowhere to go anyway. On May 7, a strange car came down the road toward the factory. Gerda noticed that there was a big white star painted on the hood, instead of a swastika; it was an American Jeep.

"He opened the door for her, and humanity and dignity returned to the earth."

Lieutenant Kurt Klein got out of the Jeep and walked up to a couple of women outside the bicycle factory. "Does anybody here speak German or English?" he asked them. Gerda answered in German. Kurt said to Gerda, "May I see the other ladies please?" Gerda says, "It was the first time in six years that anybody had called me a lady."

Gerda said to Kurt "I am a Jew, you know." And Kurt said "So am I."

Gerda led him into the factory to meet the other living skeletons, and as they approached the door, Kurt rushed ahead to open the door for Gerda. And Gerda would say later, "That was the moment I knew that kindness and dignity had returned to the earth. He opened the door for me."

When Gerda recovered her strength, she married Lieutenant Kurt Klein. Gerda says, "He not only opened the door of that bicycle factory for me, but the door of my life and future." They were married for 56 years, until Kurt died in 2002. Gerda is still with us. She will be 98 in May, and lives in Phoenix. President Obama awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011.

—Prayers of the People—

By The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

He opened the door for her, and humanity and dignity returned to the earth.

So think about shoes today, ski boots and army boots. Gerda survived because her father made her wear her ski boots in June. But think about Kurt's boots too.

Here's an 18-year-old Jewish kid living safely in Buffalo, New York, but his boots took him back to Germany, his birthplace, to win the war for freedom, dignity, and humanity. Be vigilant about where your shoes take you.



Presidential Medal of Freedom 2011

God of morning, wake us up to a sense of wonder today in awe of the very essence of our being, connected one-to-another in the complex web of creation.

Open our eyes to your presence as the glowing embers of sunrise leave streaks of cloud across morning sky.

Rooted in meditation and contemplation, in the deep breath of prayer, we ask that you make us brave in the face of every vulnerability and fear. Protect and enfold us in the face of danger and uncertainty.

In pain, in worry, in fear, in grief, hear our groaning prayer, with sighs too deep for words. Pour out your spirit upon the whole earth, upon places of sickness and health, joy and sorrow, riches and poverty, war and peace.

We feel the polarity, the dichotomy, the disjunction of our relative safety in a war torn world. Be with Ukraine, with all those who fight an unwanted, unwelcome, harrowing war. You know the faces. You know the names. You know the worries. Be, O God. Draw near.

Be with those in the most tender places: birthing rooms and funeral parlors, hospital rooms and inpatient counseling centers, homeless shelters and courthouse hallways.

Let some semblance of peace grow between us, even here, even now, so that some piece of our hearts might melt toward those who slander and offend us, those who denigrate and dishonor us.

There are so many, Lord. For brother, sister, parent, child, friend, and neighbor. We lift up our hearts to you in the safe silence of this sanctuary, O Rock and Redeemer ... And now, let our voices join in unity as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us saying, Our Father.... Amen.