

Y'all, I want to tell you a story about the past week. Starting Monday, I got messages from all over the diocese about ICE raids. Sackett's Harbor, Sidney, Paul Smiths, Hounsfield, Lisbon, Syracuse. One of those was a mother and her kids.¹ There's ICE detainees in the Oneida County jail.² Farther afield, video went viral of a student from Tufts (who's here legally, by the way) getting ambushed on the street and taken away by a group of masked plainclothes officers with little to no visible identification.³ And then I received an anonymous tip that ICE was coming for the Ukrainians.

Before I go any further, they're okay. Fortunately, the tip didn't pan out, and ICE didn't show up after all. They're safe for the time being. But after a week of nearby raids, we were on high alert, and if nothing else, the situation ended up being a good test run for the next time. By the way, if you're on Team Ukraine and didn't hear anything about this, consider that a good thing. It means the tip didn't rise to the level of needing to rally all the helpers, but it felt real close. From the time I got the tip in the middle of Friday until Saturday morning, I was horrified. After all the talk of what's to come, it finally came. We had volunteers circling the block keeping an eye on places of employment and homes. We watched for unmarked vans and men in plainclothes. We spoke with employers and got the family to take a Know Your Rights training. They even learned English phrases they can use when one of these threats eventually becomes reality. When I called the Hamilton Police Department to report the tip, my voice shook. I was so angry and so afraid that I couldn't keep my voice steady because we'd suddenly shifted from warnings to real life.

Think of everything we've done with that lovely family. Think of the many ways our community's strengthened by their presence here. Think of that little boy in elementary school, the mother working two jobs, the grandparents seeking calm and quiet in their retirement, the sister who moved to another city so her daughter could attend college while both of them work to pay for the pleasure. These are not hypotheticals. These are people we know with names and birthdays and favorite foods. These are people that've fed me until I'm fit to burst on two separate Easters. These are people that've fed you and told you their stories. But maybe that's not compelling enough. So let me try this from a Gospel perspective: these are people. If you live on the same street that they do, they are your neighbors. Literal, down-the-street neighbors, and the forces of Rome or Babylon or Washington, however you wanna say it, those masked, unidentified, street clothes-wearing goons have them in their sights. Those goons answer to the same kind of forces, by the way, that would ask Jesus why he welcomes and eats with sinners, when what they really mean is 'why would you ever think helping another person could be worthwhile?' And I know, some folks are willing to tolerate all these disappearances because 'at least we're getting rid of some gangs.'⁴ So we're told. We've already talked about due process and how the trafficking of humans without trial to a foreign country amounts to nothing shy of state-sponsored kidnapping, so I don't need to remind you of that. You know these people. You cannot convince me that little Lev with his backpack and lion roars and night terrors deserves what threatened to take him Friday.

Back when the US started using drones to bomb foreign enemies from the safety of a base in Florida, I remember seeing a children's cartoon from Afghanistan. In that cartoon, an anthropomorphized airplane drone with a scowling face was the bad guy hunting the protagonists. Regardless of what you think of that war, I want

¹<https://www.nyc.gov/2025/03/mother-and-three-children-wrongfully-abducted-and-disappeared-by-ice-in-north-country-ny/>

²<https://sheriff.oneidacountyny.gov/quick-links/inmate-list/>

³<https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/29/us/rumeysa-ozturk-tufts-university-arrest-saturday/index.html>

⁴<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/18/us/trump-deportations-venezuela-gang.html>

you to hear what I just said. What we called a justifiable tool of warfare, their children called the boogeyman. Only, they didn't need the boogeyman 'cause they had us.⁵ Well, folks, the new boogeyman keeping people up at night wears a black hoodie and a mask, hides a badge, and snatches people away in secrecy. I'm afraid of that boogeyman, and you should be, too. But while they may be on the verge of disappearing from our sight, those beloved Ukrainians of ours are no Prodigal Son. They didn't run here for a hedonistic rumspringa. They're here, let me remind you, because their home is gone, leveled by bombs and soldiers happy to commit war crimes just to gain an inch more of soil. Oh, and our country -- we -- invited them here. Our Ukrainian family won't get a chance to choose to squander the gifts they've received. That choice's already been stolen from them. Their bodily autonomy is being stolen, too. They have no wealthy family members waiting for their return. They face a situation where no choices remain, only waiting and a hope that the people around them, their neighbors -- that's us -- will step up. After all he did, the Prodigal Son at least had a place to return to. We don't know where this family would go if they were taken. I pray it's not El Salvador. An immigration lawyer we've spoken with says Canada's not a legal option. Ukraine's effectively inaccessible, unless someone decides to take them there anyway out of spite. There are few, if any, legal and safe options. They don't know what's next, and they don't have a choice. They face an impossibility with no agency of their own.

Meanwhile, the rest of us also face impossibilities. Friday night, sitting around the dinner table with a friend, the conversation turned to the dark threat hanging over our village. My wife, my friend, and I thought out loud about what might happen if something were to happen. We all agreed that, if ICE were to come for the Ukrainians, we have a duty to stand between them. And we all know that carries risk. Look, I'm here. I have no intention of going anywhere. But because I will stand here and preach and teach and challenge as long as I can, I'm not completely safe. I've made that choice. I don't need you to worry for me; I need you to be honest with yourself and make a choice, too. I gave Becca a list of who to get in touch with if she were to come home expecting to find me and I wasn't there. She gave a similar list to me. Our friend works with a whole bunch of people, but some of them are either in greater danger than her or are the primary providers for their families. She knows that if ICE were to come, the threat to her is somewhat less because she's white and doesn't have kids. She asked if we would care for her cat.

These are the impossible choices of fascism. Do you stand up for strangers? Do you protect your family? Do you fight for justice? Do you keep yourself safe? I used to think that all the folks left in Germany that didn't fight the Nazis after they took control were also Nazis. I'm beginning to rethink that assumption. I wonder how many regular people sat around their dinner tables having these same conversations in 1933. I wonder how many professors wanted to speak out but were scared into silence for the well-being of their families. I wonder how many police officers knew they were doing the wrong thing but were too afraid to defy orders. I wonder how many good people stayed quiet not because they were cowards but because they couldn't imagine letting what happened to their neighbors happen to their own children. And you know what, that individual risk assessment under the thumb of fascism is an impossible choice. I'm not sure I can fault them or anyone today for being crushed into submission. But that doesn't absolve inaction. It just means not everyone can afford to fight back in the same ways. Some need to be out on the street, some need to work in the background where their skin color can't be seen. Some need to risk everything while some need to get their spouse to safety first. Some need to appear to appease authority while using their positions to gum up the crushing gears of authoritarian might.

Y'all, I'm furious, and I'm scared, and I'm grateful for the vast support in this community for all our neighbors. If Lent has taught me anything this year, it's that our society's got a whole lot to give up, but we've

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4NRJoCNHIs>

chosen all the wrong things to purge. I'm hopeful that our liturgical cycle can teach us a thing or two. I'm hopeful Palm Sunday reminds us that it's Jesus' conquering entry we celebrate, not Rome's. I'm hopeful that Holy Week reminds us that we belong to that ancient fight only with a new boogeyman. And I'm hopeful that Easter shows us that we can win even when the task ahead is impossible. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us, remember? We don't have to do all things, thank God, but we do have to do something so that what once was lost -- or deported or kidnapped or disappeared -- all those who once were lost soon will be found safe, whole, and under our care once again. These are people.