**Comfort and Hope** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Second Sunday of Advent The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8 Saint Paul, Minnesota
December 10, 2023

In August of 2018 Gail and I took a Viking River Cruise on the Danube that started in Budapest, Hungary, and ended (eight days later) in Nuremberg, Germany.

Yes, we were one of those older (but not too, old!) couples that are featured in Viking commercials—smiling on our Veranda with wine glass in hand (except for Gail, because she doesn’t like wine) as we cruised slowly along the Danube, taking in the beautiful sights in every direction (except when we were transferred to buses due to low water levels because of widespread drought that summer in Europe).

One of the most memorable parts of the cruise was a group of people we met on the boat from Hibbing, Minnesota. They all attended the same Lutheran Church--and I have to honestly say that the amount of beer and wine and other alcoholic beverages this group consumed over the course of the cruise was truly remarkable! And here’s the kicker: *their Pastor was with them!*

Anyway, one day, between shore excursions, I was reading an article in *The Atlantic* about Viktor Orban. A fellow passenger, sitting next to me in one of the lounge areas, glanced at my iPad, and asked, *“Who is Viktor Orban?* And I casually said, *“Oh, he’s the dictator of Hungary—you know, the country we just visited.*

And his eyes got really big—and his mouth was open …

Viktor Orbán began his fourth term as prime minister this past Spring and both older and younger generations of Christian leaders are taking up the mantle of *resistance.* They face long odds: their attempts to organize against authoritarianism are complicated both by infighting and by the government’s dirty tricks.

Hungary is a Central European country of 10 million people; most of them reside in Budapest, the capital on the Danube River. According to the European Parliament, Hungary is no longer a democracy. Experts call it a mafia state and an electoral autocracy. With the help of his political party, Fidesz, Orbán has rewritten the country’s constitution, taken over the judiciary, and turned over entire sectors of the economy to his oligarch friends. By the 2018 election, Fidesz was able to win a 67 percent parliamentary majority with just 49 percent of the vote. He hasn’t gotten rid of elections altogether; he’s rigged the rules, so he’ll never lose.

But *“mafia state”* and *“electoral autocracy”* don’t give the whole picture, because Orbán has extended his control far beyond elections and the economy. American Christians should be alarmed by Orbán’s manipulation of Hungary’s churches. While Orbán spews hateful rhetoric against refugees, ethnic Roma, and LGBTQ Hungarians, he claims to be making Hungary into a bastion of Christianity in Europe.

Meanwhile, Orbán has bought the loyalty of the country’s churches, including the large Reformed denomination and the Roman Catholic Church, by giving them huge sums to renovate church buildings and denominational schools. Most Hungarian church leaders have remained *silent* about Orbán’s hateful policies. Independent journalist *Alex Faludy* has an expression to explain their failure to speak out: *“It’s very difficult to speak prophetic words of protest when you’ve got coins in your mouth.”*

For the length of Orbán’s rule, *Gábor Iványi,* the leader of a tiny Hungarian Methodist denomination, has provided spiritual inspiration to the country’s *anti-authoritarian resistance.* Iványi started his career in the 1970s preaching the gospel on Budapest streets, challenging the empty consumerism of Hungary’s late socialist system. His shaggy beard is now white, but he still has the intense gaze of a *wilderness prophet.* With his charisma and a compelling biography, Iványi has attracted international news coverage, including a 2019 New York Times profile.

At 72 Iványi is part of an aging group of Hungarian church leaders who began as Communist-era dissidents. But an emerging generation of Hungarian pastors is also standing up to Orbán’s *Christian nationalist regime—*people like 37-year-old *Márta Bolba*, a minister in Hungary’s small Lutheran denomination. With war raging next door in Ukraine and no end in sight to Orbán’s regime, Bolba and other Christian activists are asking how they can best resist today’s authoritarian regimes.

Bolba serves *Mandák House,* a Lutheran congregation in Budapest’s Józsefváros neighborhood. Government-run media routinely stigmatize Józsefváros, calling it the city’s poorest and roughest neighborhood. When Bolba joined this congregation, her first act was to organize a weekly open dinner for her neighbors.

Bolba first gained attention in 2013 when she faced down police on the steps of Budapest’s city hall. She joined the housing advocacy group *The City Is for All* in a nonviolent action. Bolba, five months pregnant with her first child, blocked the doors to city hall to protest a government urban renewal plan.

Since then, she has helped lead multiple campaigns to defend the rights of Józsefváros’s residents against officials who talk about *“cleaning up”* the neighborhood’s poverty. Against the area’s Roma residents, Orbán’s lackeys have used racist dog whistles about *“bleaching”* the streets. Bolba calls this *“fascist rhetoric”* and decries this effort to manipulate the public’s fears.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I share this with you because Ivanyi and Bolba remind me of another *wilderness prophet, John the Baptist.* John the Baptist, you see, lived under an authoritarian regime, as well. Known to us both from the New Testament and from the Jewish historian Josephus, John stood in the charismatic stream of Judaism. His style of dress emulated Elijah, and his contemporaries compared him to a prophet. Renowned for his eloquent and passionate call for repentance, John proclaimed that it was not sufficient to be *“children of Abraham,”* but called the Jewish people to a more intense relationship to God sealed by a ritual of initiation. Crowds flocked to this charismatic, some to be baptized.

Jesus was among them. All of the gospels (as well as Acts) connect the beginning of Jesus’s ministry to his baptism by John. His ministry began with an intense experience of the Spirit of God—he had a spiritual awakening of some sort in his late 20’s. And it all took place *in the wilderness.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

The wilderness, you see, is inherently a place of *discomfort.* In scripture and literature, wilderness represents that which is *unknown, feral, uncontrolled, and challenging.* It evokes a sense of vulnerability and exposure. But wilderness also *implies growth, journey, and the possibility for divine encounter.* Think Moses and the burning bush, Elijah and the still-small voice, Hagar and the well, and Jesus after his baptism.

I can’t imagine John was very comfortable out there in the wilderness. A camel-hair cloak sounds kind of itchy, and it takes a special type of foodie to appreciate entomological cuisine. But the wilderness—and everything it represents—provides the perfect backdrop for his message about a coming Messiah, an emergent kingdom of God, and an upending of life as usual.

We can thank American humorist *Finley Peter Dunne* for coining the phrase *“comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.”* He was talking about newspapers, but his words have theological merit as well. The promises of God are *not* always comfortable. Mountains will be brought low, and valleys raised up. The powerful will be humbled and the vulnerable lifted. These reversals bring *comfort* to those who are despairing and in exile, even as they bring *discomfort* to those who are accustomed to privilege.[[3]](#footnote-3)

However, Isaiah (in today’s first reading) proclaims *words of comfort* to those who have experienced something *far beyond discomfort.* Israel, you see, is emerging from destruction and exile, suffering and devastation beyond what we would ever try to describe simply as *“character building.”* For these exiles, comfort comes through the prophet’s words. Comfort sounds like the assurance that the worst is over; it looks like a return home. It feels like creation restored, like a clear path forward. Comfort resides in the glory and might of a victorious God, and it is poured out in God’s promises*.[[4]](#footnote-4)*

Which brings me back to the contemporary situation in Hungary—which, increasingly, echoes what is happening in many other countries around the world.

In the (almost) two years since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine forced 8 million people to flee their country, some Hungarian Christians have been living out the gospel of compassion for the stranger. In Hungary, 34,000 Ukrainians have registered for the EU’s temporary protection status which guarantees refugees access to education and housing. In November, *Mandák House,* with the help of the United Nations and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, built a new refugee services center in Budapest called Dévai Fogadó (*the Inn on Dévai Street*). Located in a renovated shoe factory, the center offers arts education and basic schooling, accommodation, and other types of social assistance.

Even before Dévai Fogadó officially opened, social workers used the space to provide Ukrainian refugees with trauma and grief counseling. Speaking at the center’s opening event, Rita Minikh, who had fled Ukraine’s war-torn east, spoke about how she crossed the border with her children. She was afraid for their future, she said, *“but Mandák House staff made us feel safe and provided a warm welcome.”*

At the opening event, Bolba addressed the crowd of international aid professionals. *“The Inn on Dévai Street is a place where people receive help*,” she said, *“but not just things. They can study together, practice crafts, and experience the arts.”*

In contemporary Hungary, no new social initiative emerges without the government knowing about it and assessing whether it’s a threat to Orbán’s power. Bolba was asked to consider the possibility that, later on, Orbán might use the Dévai Fogadó as leverage to silence her.

Her response was adamant. According to Bolba, there is nothing she could say that the government does not know already.

In fact, she continued, it is church leaders who are most afraid of her opinions. Because of her growing activism, she’s been shut out of Hungary’s ecclesiastical media coverage*. “In church newspapers, it’s almost like I don’t exist,”* she said.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Friends, geopolitical prognostications aside, Hungarian Christians’ resistance raises both historical and theological-ethical questions*: When the political process has failed to defeat authoritarianism, what forms of Christian resistance have yet managed to weaken these regimes? What forms of Christian witness and practice are faithful and non-idolatrous, and therefore able to withstand the manipulations of principalities and powers?*

In 20th-century Europe, Christians asked these questions when God called them to resist fascism or communism. Returning to the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn would be a valuable exercise for American Christians today. But before we debate these questions in church halls and seminaries, we should (at least vicariously) take a seat at Bolba’s Wednesday night dinners and learn from the Christians who (of necessity) feel this calling today.

Remember the words of Isaiah: *“the grass withers, and the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.”* This means that there are eternal truths, given to us by God, embodied by Jesus Christ, that will never fade, wither, or die. Therefore, even in the heart and heat of despair, we can light each Advent candle, bearing witness to the *hope, peace, joy, and love* of God’s promises. And that’s Good News!

1. ###  Marc Roscoe Loustau, *Hungary’s Progressive Christian Resistance,* The Christian Century, May 31, 2023

 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision,* Harper, San Francisco, 1991, pp. 40, 41, 42 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Melissa Bills,  *December 10, Advent 2B, Isaiah 40:1-11. Mark 1:1-8,* The Christian Century, December 7, 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Marc Roscoe Loustau, *Hungary’s Progressive Christian Resistance,* The Christian Century, May 31, 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)