

## 'Undercover' Art Provides Uplift in Dark Times

*The Wired Word for the Week of November 20, 2022*

### In the News

Seven new murals by an anonymous street artist known as Banksy have appeared on bombed-out ruins in war-torn Ukraine, including in the capital Kyiv, the suburb of Irpin and the town of Borodyanka, all places hard hit by Russian bombardments.

Three murals were spotted in locations around the embattled country earlier this month, leading to speculation that Banksy, who is believed to be based in Bristol in the UK, was at work in Ukraine. The artist has since confirmed that those murals are his work, along with four others in various locations around Ukraine, which has been under Russian attack since late February of this year.

The murals include:

- a man said to resemble the Russian president Vladimir Putin being thrown to the floor during a judo match with a young boy
- a gymnast doing a handstand.
- two children using a metal tank trap as a seesaw
- a female gymnast in a neck brace dancing with a ribbon
- a woman in her dressing gown, hair in curlers, wearing a gas mask and wielding a fire extinguisher
- a bearded man taking a bath
- a work in which Banksy appears to have incorporated existing graffiti of a penis, turning it into a nuclear warhead loaded onto the back of an armored truck

Both the painting of the gymnast doing the handstand and the judo takedown of Putin by a young boy are on bombed-out buildings in Borodyanka, a community that was besieged by Russian forces early in the invasion and subjected to aerial bombardment. After the Ukrainians recaptured the town in April, investigators subsequently found many mass graves where the bodies of civilians, who bore evidence of having been tortured, had been buried. War crimes also appear to have been committed in Irpin and Bucha.

The new works are Banksy's first public murals in more than a year, though this is not the first time his work has been associated with Ukraine. In March, a print of one of his most famous anti-war pieces, *CND Soldiers*, was sold at auction, raising \$106,505 for a children's hospital in Kyiv. This work originally symbolized the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) of 1957 and is now widely known as an international symbol of peace.

Writing in *Artnet News*, Jo Lawson-Tancred said, "Banksy's artworks tend to contain messages that are socially or politically motivated, and they have been popping up for decades now on city streets all over the world. In his works in Ukraine, the artist hints at how gravely the lives of normal citizens have been affected by the war through his trademark use of jarring juxtapositions."

Artwork has a way of speaking to one's spirit and soul, sometimes providing uplift in times of trouble. In a circumstance completely unrelated to Ukraine, a congregation whose house of worship was destroyed by Hurricane Ian on September 28 received inspiration from a mural the storm revealed. The church is Chapel By The Sea Presbyterian on Fort Myers Beach, Florida, and during the storm, water 11 feet high swept through the building. Its interim pastor is Dr. James Berger, who is a member of the TWW team. Berger says he is now also the recovery pastor.

"The devastation of Fort Myers Beach is cataclysmic," Berger says. He explains that the images we've seen on the news are of the business district on the west end of the island. "As you go east it gets worse, whole blocks of homes wiped away." Berger's home is 12 miles from the church "and I had 3 feet of water in my house," he says. "Nearly 100 miles of coastal communities, from Naples to Venice were flooded or damaged by the wind and rain. And then it went inland, crossed the state and walloped the eastern seaboard. One massive, powerful storm."

But, Berger said, "After Hurricane Ian destroyed the sanctuary at Chapel By The Sea, we discovered a 10-foot painting of [the church's three-dolphin logo on the side of the building behind it](#). We thought that was a common wall for the two buildings; no one knew they were separate buildings and no one knew the painting was there." In this picture you can see part of the mural behind the upper right corner of the sanctuary. The bell in the painting is from the original building and was in the narthex of the Chapel. "We found it in the rubble and saved it," Berger said.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Banksy Just Revealed Seven New Artworks He Created on Bombed-Out Buildings Throughout Ukraine -- See Them Here. \*Artnet News\*](#)  
[Banksy. \*Global Peace Warriors\*](#)

### **The Big Questions**

1. Banksy's art is technically "graffiti"; it's not been commissioned and is placed in locations without permission. How, if at all, should these facts affect how we think about his purpose in creating his street art?
2. The Banksy art in Ukraine depicts the triumph of a persecuted people against a disproportionately large bully. What enables something that is essentially a gesture to awaken hope?

3. What are the positive values of doing a good thing anonymously? What are the negative values?
4. How much hope and courage are we justified in taking from unexpected gestures of encouragement? Why?
5. What works of art might Jesus want his followers to prepare for people going through hard times?

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **Daniel 5:5-6**

*Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and began writing on the plaster of the wall of the royal palace, next to the lampstand. The king was watching the hand as it wrote. Then the king's face turned pale, and his thoughts terrified him. His limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together.* (For context, read [Daniel 5:1-31](#).)

This biblical story is the source of the modern saying "the writing on the wall," which refers to a warning of doom about to befall. It's likely too much to expect that Vladimir Putin will see in or behind the Banksy art any kind of "writing on the wall" regarding his future or the full cost he or his country will pay for his aggressive posture toward Ukraine, but the Bible story suggests that God can use anything, including dramatic imagery to impart warning to some and hope to others.

**Questions:** Select one of the Banksy murals and tell what encouragement a Ukrainian might take from it. What message might you draw from finding an intact item from your church after a devastating storm destroyed the building? When has some sort of "writing on the wall" enabled you to change course and avoid a problem?

#### **Matthew 6:3-4**

*But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.* (For context, read [Matthew 6:1-4](#).)

The two verses preceding the two quoted above argued that charitable giving should be kept secret, so that it is not done for praise by others. This verse uses a metaphor to build on this argument, but there is some debate over exactly what it means. This verse is the origin of a commonly used expression, "the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing," but that is generally a criticism for an organization where different members are pursuing opposing or contradictory goals, and that is clearly not what Jesus was talking about.

Since a person with two hands must know what both are doing, Jesus' statement here is most like hyperbole to communicate that giving should be an automatic action without need to consider the potential rewards. If one spends too much effort pondering giving, one might scheme to have even secret donations made public so that one might be praised. Thus, the verse means that the right hand should by reflex be generous without the need for mental calculus of

the left hand. By this interpretation, the left hand not knowing what the right is doing is a metaphor for how covert the proper donor should be.

Perhaps something like this is part of why Banksy chooses to remain anonymous even as he provides art to encourage people going through tough times not to despair. While we can't know his view of himself, he doesn't make himself available for reward and praise from others.

**Questions:** How does not letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing jibe with IRS charity deduction bookkeeping? Should we care?

**Psalm 46:1-3, 7**

*God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea,  
though its waters roar and foam,  
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. ...  
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*  
(For context, read [Psalm 46:1-11](#).)

Psalm 46, as well as a good number of the other psalms, speak of God as a "refuge," which is a metaphor for God's care and protection. In the psalmist's day, a refuge could be a hideout or a place to be protected from harm, but usually it was a place where individuals could take a stand on firm footing to battle those coming against them. To take refuge in God then means not hide from life but to trust God, whose love and care for us is unending.

In the last century, the biblical scholar J.B. Phillips wrote a book titled *Your God Is Too Small*, which has since become a classic work. His point is that many of the ideas we have of God are simply too limiting, and that if we worship the god of those concepts, we miss glimpsing the true God.

One of the too-small ideas of God Phillips describes is the one he labels the "Heavenly Bosom." This is God pictured as a loving parent inviting us to return to the comfort and dependence of childhood. Phillips says we have even fostered that inadequate image by such things as the hymn "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," which contains the lines, "let me to thy bosom fly," and "Hide me, O my Savior, hide, till all the storms of life are past." Phillips argues that such lines paint God as a place of escape and invite us to emotional immaturity, and he points out while God may at times say to us "Come unto me," sooner or later he says "Go out in my name."

Phillips gives a good example of what the psalmist meant when he spoke of God as our refuge, though Phillips doesn't call it by that name. He describes a man who faces a lot of problems in his daily work and strains in his other duties. But this man is also happily married and thus looks forward to returning home each day. And because his home is a place of love and joy, he is able to cope, even with some zest, with those difficulties outside. If his marriage were to go sour, however, he might find the other problems of life altogether too much to deal with. The happy

home, being a refuge (Phillips calls it the man's "center of operations"), gives him a place not to hide, but to regroup and then sally forth again.

In saying that God is our refuge, the psalmist is not seeking to escape, but he recognizes that God is our rock of secure footing, of joy, and of strength from which to deal with the problems of life. God is a refuge who protects us not by hiding us, but by adequately equipping us to face that which cannot be avoided, whether it be cancer, meaninglessness, terrorism, death of a loved one, financial loss, foreclosure, war, natural disaster or anything else.

"God is our refuge," the psalmist says, and that statement is based on an immutable facet of the universe: God himself.

**Questions:** In what ways is God a refuge for you? What kind of refuge is God?

### **Colossians 1:3-5**

*In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel ... (For context, read [Colossians 1:1-14](#).)*

This is but one of several places in the New Testament where faith, love and hope are mentioned together. With that in mind, picture a man stumbling along in a heavy fog, totally lost and disoriented. But then, way off in the distance, he sees a light from one small lamp. There is not sufficient light to burn off the fog, nor enough light to illuminate all the obstacles that might be on the ground between the man and that lamp. Still, it is a steadily burning lamp, and something within himself causes him to believe if he heads toward that lamp, he will be going in the right direction. That "something" we will call *faith*. While heading toward the lamp he finds another lost man whose eyesight is so poor he can't see the lamp. So the first man takes him by the hand and helps him toward the lamp also. The act of reaching out to another we will call *love*. And the lamp that draws him? It is called *hope*.

This illustration suggests that hope is something that radiates toward us from a distant source -- which can be a way of saying that God is the source of our hope. This is important, for we are apt to think that hope is something that originates in *us*, but actually it is a glimmer of eternity that fuels our faith and prompts our charity.

In fact, without hope, the other two great virtues would mean something less than they do. Faith without hope would be a dirty trick. It would be like the man lost in the fog finally getting near the light only to discover it is not connected to any useful destination and could not actually give him direction. And love without hope would be mere commiseration, just a sharing of despair.

But hope is a gleam from God that gives us confidence that our faith is not misplaced.

The word hope has been diluted today because it has sometimes been made synonymous with wishing. We buy a ticket in the lottery and hope that we hit the right numbers. Our children go to

school and we hope that they will behave themselves. We invest in some real estate and hope to turn a profit when we sell it.

But in the Bible, hoping and wishing are not the same thing. The Christian hope is not simply a trembling, hesitant wish that perhaps the promises of God may be true. It is an expectation that they cannot be anything else but true.

**Questions:** If faith, hope and love are the fruit of the gospel, what should that fruit look like? feel like? taste like?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. TWW team member Frank Ramirez says, "It's interesting that it took five centuries for the cross to appear in Christian art -- apparently that's after the time that people were actually being crucified. The late Graydon F. Snyder, in his book *Ante-Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine*, points out that the favorite themes in early Christian art before the faith was legal centered around the Jonah and Noah cycles. In both, the persecuted church is represented by two figures who were preserved from the chaos of the waters by God's miraculous grace. Jonah's stubbornness and Noah's animals don't figure in these cycles. Noah appears as a tiny figure sailing in an open box, for instance. But these images spoke to the chaos the Christians found themselves in. Also popular themes included Daniel in the Lion's Den and the Three Young Men in the Fiery Furnace.

"By contrast, Celtic Christianity was not in nearly the persecuted cauldron of Roman Christianity. Snyder, in his book *Irish Jesus Roman Jesus*, points out that Celtic art focused on Jesus the healer, and incorporated the Sun, the source of all life in the old Celtic religion, as a circle that was centered in the Cross."

What images do you think would most exemplify God's message to the church today?

2. What do you think God might want your congregation to do if your church building were destroyed in a natural catastrophe?

### **Responding to the News**

Are there artists in your congregation? What if you asked them to create some public art to be displayed at or near your church, art that might give passers-by cause for hope?

### **Prayer**

Thank you, O Lord, for the ability to hope and that such hope is anchored in the certainty of your kingdom to come. In Jesus' name. Amen.