

“Fear Not the Fox – Being a Temple Presence”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Psalm 27:1-6; Luke 13:31-35

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Second Lent

Herod is back. This is Herod Antipas, son of King Herod the Great. An appointee of the Romans, his power and domain were limited by the empire. He had two main cities within his domain: Sepphoris – his first capital – and Tiberias, a city he had built to replace the first capital. [Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), p.69.] There is no record Jesus ever entered these two Galilean cities, though we know not whether the reason was purposeful or circumstantial.

Yet, even though his rule was more limited than his father’s, this Herod, and his agents known as Herodians, instilled fear in the Jewish people. That fear of Herod is the context for our Gospel lesson, which begins with a group of Pharisees warning Jesus that Herod wants to kill him.

We are not to miss the intrigue of this scene. Luke usually portrays the Pharisees in a negative light, either for their lack of understanding of Jesus’ purpose, or for their testing to defame or embarrass him. Some biblical scholars see their warning as an attempt to instill fear in Jesus so he will head for the hills with his followers and therefore be out of the Pharisees’ way. Others find the Pharisees’ intent to be sincere, though still lacking in understanding of Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus’ response to the Pharisees’ warning is a statement of his prophetic call to teach and preach and heal – and be killed, in Jerusalem. So he rejects the warning to take flight out of fear of Herod. Let us hear our Gospel lesson in Luke 13:31-35:

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Fear. It is an all encompassing feeling. At its best, it can protect us from danger; for example, we teach children to fear a hot stove. At its worse, it can paralyze us; we find a degree of this in situations of domestic violence in which fear of harm immobilizes one’s ability to act in one’s own behalf and for one’s wellbeing. Fear is often based on power relationships, and in our lesson, Herod had used his power to order harm, even a killing, and thus induced fear.

Jesus’ response to the warning about Herod’s death threat is direct, beginning with, “Go and tell that fox for me...”. Fox is the direct translation from the Greek word for the animal. In biblical times, as today, fox implied one who can be sly, crafty, strong and malicious.

Jesus seems to reject the fear others had of Herod. We could surmise because Jesus was divine, fear was not an issue for him. Gods don't have fears, we think. Yet, that would belie our understanding Jesus was God incarnate, God in the flesh, and therefore knew human pain and stress, sorrow and joy, and yes, even fear. Our relationship with Jesus is linked to both his humanity and his divinity, which means human fear would have been part of Jesus' reality.

Particularly around Christmas, we hear spoken the biblical phrase, "Fear not!" Offered to Mary before Jesus' birth, to the shepherds at, and to Joseph after, angels seek to still our fears. At Easter the women at the tomb will be told not to fear. Jesus tells the disciples not to fear when he first calls them. Fear not. Do not be afraid.

These verses can make us think fear is a human fallibility. It can leave the impression the faithful should not have fears, or there is something wrong with us if we can't overcome it. We are caught in the middle. In our humanity, we feel real fear; in our faith, we think we are told we should not be afraid.

I don't think this understanding of "Fear not!" is right or healthy. With such an approach, we tend to bury our fear, and put on an outside aura of strength we do not feel. Fear is real.

What soldier in a battle does not fear for her or his life? What person approaching surgery does not ponder the possibility he or she may not wake up? What parent does not become anxious when a child is out past a curfew? Who does not panic if confronted by a stranger in a dark parking lot? What child does not fear when separated from her or his parents?

Fear is a part of human life. I don't think eliminating fear is our goal. Coping with fear is what we seek to do. As such, there is an alternative understanding of the "Fear not!" phrase. Rather than hearing the call of angels and Jesus as a command we should not have fears, we might better receive their words as an assurance our fears need not overcome us. This makes more sense to me.

Psalm 27 offers wisdom and assurance about fear. We might even consider it is wisdom and assurance Jesus carried with him to turn back the Pharisees' warnings to fear Herod, the fox.

I find similarities with the 23rd Psalm in Psalm 27. The phrases, "enemies all around me" and "an army encamped against me" remind me of "you prepare a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." And the verse, "one thing I ask of the Lord...to live in the house of the Lord forever," is near exactly the closing line of the more familiar, "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

A great gift of the psalms is how they openly set forth the human fears in our lives – enemies, valley of the shadow, death – and present the options of facing those fears alone, or with the presence of the Lord as one's shepherd, one's light and salvation, the stronghold of one's life.

The image of living in the house of the Lord forever is a key element to understanding the psalmist's approach to the fear faced. The house of the Lord refers to the temple being the dwelling place of God. The psalmist is not writing of a desire to physically be in the temple day and night, but to be able to absorb the peace, the strength, the sanctuary, the hope felt in the temple and its worship, and then carry it out when leaving its shelter.

Walter Brueggemann states the desire this way, “[The psalmist’s] yearning is that the presence of Yahweh – the Lord – [that is] known decisively *in* the temple, should be available” [*outside* the temple.] Brueggemann calls this “temple presence.” [Brueggemann, Walter, *The Message of the Psalms*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1984) p. 153] Temple presence is the psalmist’s tool in facing real fears when leaving the sacred space.

One note on sacred spaces. For some, it is a temple or church – perhaps a cathedral or a small country church. Yet, sacred spaces can also be a room in your home, a place in the woods, a library, or even a hilltop. It is a place readily accessible, which we can reach to recharge. What defines sacred space is the place where one finds “temple presence,” that sense of comfort and peace that fills and strengthens. As I visited with a member yesterday about this, we were reminded Jesus often found that space in a lonely place, by himself, early in the day.

Jesus responded to fear about Herod, not with a “bring him on” attitude of power, but with the strength of temple presence. He told the Pharisees: Go tell that fox I have been sent here for a purpose and I am going to fulfill it. I have demons to cast out and people to heal. I will finish my work. This was the human Jesus, vulnerable to the pain of a cross, still set on reaching Jerusalem, and not turning back because of Herod or anyone else.

As I think about those I most respect and admire in life, they are not those who seem to “have it all,” or even have it all together. I most respect or admire those who witness in their everyday living an understanding of God as always available, not to guarantee a pain-free or even a fear-free life, but God as temple presence. In such people, I see not the absence of fear, but the facing of fear with a strength that is stronger than weapons and richer than money.

Each day we receive an email from Garrison Keillor called “The Writer’s Almanac.” He also reads it on the radio. It tells about writers with birthdays and events with anniversaries, and it closes with prose or a poem. Recently, one entitled “Communion,” caught my eye as I thought of carrying with us a temple presence. [“Communion” by Lawrence Kessenich from *Age of Wonders*. © Big Table Publishing, 2016.]

The writer recalls how in his childhood in Chicago, he attended early morning mass each day during Lent with his mother and a neighbor. It is cold in Chicago during Lent. He recreates a description of entering St. Monica’s, writing:

“Inside, stained glass windows,
a feast of color in daylight, are black.

The church is barn-cold.

Candles burn, bells ring, prayers are murmured, songs sung. The church warms slowly.

I sit, stand, kneel between the two women, rituals washing over me like soft waves on Lake Michigan in August.”

I hear that as a description of “temple presence” the writer remembered, but Lawrence Kessenich then describes how he takes it with him out of the church. He concludes:

“Later, I carry the sacred mood out on my [paper] route, dispensing [news]papers like Communion to my neighbors.”

I expect there are times, in the face of real and present danger, when each of us has sensed this kind of sacred mood, God's temple presence. I expect there are also times when we have not. When we do not, we will likely heed the call of the Pharisees to find shelter in our earthly securities from whatever fox we find threatening us.

Yet, in those times, when we are able to carry the temple presence with us, we will be strengthened to face our fears, and say with Jesus, "I will not fear the fox, for I still have work to do, and I am going to finish it." And with the poet, we can dispense this temple presence like Communion, to our neighbors, and perhaps even to the stranger in our midst who we have been told to fear.