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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18, Luke 13:31-35
Courage

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³²And he said to them, “Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.’” (Luke 13:32, RSV)

It is an old rule of morality that the brave man, the brave woman, is not the one who feels no fear, but rather the one who if he or she should feel fear, nonetheless presses on toward the good. In this morning’s story about Jesus and that fox, Herod, we see a brave man at work.

Courage is not a mere matter of words. Many a person can speak bravely, but then wilt in the moment of crisis. So it was with St. Peter, for example, who swore that he would never abandon our Lord, but did nonetheless. Indeed, his courage seems to have evaporated before the questions of a maid.

But when we look at Jesus in today’s story, we see one who not only speaks bravely, but more importantly, conducts himself bravely. The great adventure of Christian life now lying before you and me is that we will follow his pattern. Courage should be no strange thing for a Christian, for we follow a brave Lord. Indeed, if darkness and gloom should gather and frighten the whole world, still there should be Christians within that world, who, undismayed by the threats, continue to strive for the good. Salt of the earth, they are. Light of the world, they should be.

PSALM 27

It seems to me that today’s appointed Psalm is especially well suited for our Gospel Lesson. Psalm 27 is a beautiful Psalm. It seems to be swept along by the very spirit of Jesus, as if the Psalmist is inspired centuries in advance of the doings of Herod and Jesus, but nonetheless knows something indeed of the spirit of Jesus as he faces Herod.

This is no mere happenstance, this similarity between the spirit of Jesus and the spirit of the Psalms. The Church has long believed that the Psalms are inspired by the Holy Spirit—that same Spirit that dwelt so fully in Jesus of Nazareth.

Indeed, there is profit for our souls in viewing the Psalms as the very prayers of Jesus. We know from the Gospels that Jesus sometimes withdrew to a lonely

place apart in order to spend time in prayer. This year's Gospel, Luke, for example, speaks of Jesus spending the night in prayer:

And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God.
(Luke 6:12, KJV)

What did he pray? If we could have been there and jotted down his prayers, I think we would come close to the Psalms.

Especially Psalm 27 seems fitting for this morning's Gospel story. What I mean to do in this sermon is to lift up three verses from that Psalm, and imagine them to be the cry of our Lord Jesus in the midst of troubles, in the midst of threats, in the midst of circumstances that could well strike fear into the heart of a person. And maybe those circumstances struck fear into the heart of Jesus, yet, being a brave man, even if his heart trembled with fear, he went onwards in his ministry. His firm determination is clear in our text:

³²And he said to them, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day *I finish my course.*'" (Luke 13:32, RSV)

And finish it he did. With his final breath, he spoke of the completion of his work:

When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is *finished*: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.
(John 19:30, KJV)

Here are the three verses from Psalm 27 I want to lift up and coordinate with the story of Jesus.

¹The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then | shall I fear?*

The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I | be afraid?

³Though an army should en- | camp against me,*

yet my heart shall not | be afraid;

¹⁴Though my father and my moth- | er forsake me,*

the Lord | will sustain me.

FIRST, OF WHOM SHALL I BE AFRAID?

First, then: of whom shall I be afraid? That is the first verse of Psalm 27:

¹The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then | shall I fear?*

The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I | be afraid?

Of whom should Jesus be afraid? Well, good-hearted Pharisees come to Jesus and warn him that Herod Antipas means him harm. Herod is not someone to dismiss. He has already shown himself capable of violence, for he is the one who ordered the beheading of John the Baptist. Not only does Herod have the heart and the will to be cruel, but he has the weight of Roman authority on his side. He has the legal authority to command beheadings. He speaks, and guards march off to the bloody task. No, Herod is not to be sneezed at.

But Jesus seems entirely unintimidated by Herod. It is not that Jesus misjudges Herod's power. He knows that he is the ruler of Galilee. He knows that he beheaded John the Baptist. He knows that soldiers and guards scurry at his command. It is simply that Jesus loves his heavenly Father and he loves you and me much more than he fears Herod.

If Goliath were to strut around on the battlefield and bellow out to the enemy hosts facing him: "Of whom shall I be afraid?" that giant would be boasting of his mighty strength and his impressive armor and of his years of military training and discipline. But those things, as impressive as they are, are still fallible. Indeed, all of Goliath's advantages fell dead along with him, felled by a shepherd boy's stone.

But when Jesus says, "Of whom then shall I be afraid?" he is not trusting in his own muscles and youth and training, but rather in his God and our God.

What a tragedy for the world it would have been if Jesus had compared his lowly status and meager strength with the official power and glory of Herod, and then run off. The fate of the world hangs in the balance. The fate of the world depends on the virtue I am commending to us today: it depends on the courage of Jesus.

SECOND, AN ARMY AGAINST ME

Verse 3 of Psalm 27 speaks of an army encamped against me:

³Though an army should en- | camp against me,*
yet my heart shall not | be afraid;

There will come a day for Jesus when someone whose authority exceeds even that of King Herod will order that an army should encamp around Jesus

and take away his life. I mean, Pontius Pilate. It was his soldiers who surrounded Jesus on the Cross. It was his Roman centurion who witnessed the death of Jesus and whose heart acknowledged that Jesus is the Son of God:

And when the centurion, which stood over against him, saw that he so cried out, and gave up the ghost, he said, Truly this man was the Son of God. (Mark 15:39, KJV)

But short of this, short of this gathering of Roman guards and the mobs looking on, Jesus already faced an army encamped against him. Indeed, every Christian does, for we battle not just against ordinary foes, but also against immense forces of sin and disorder we can hardly measure or even sense, but which mean us harm nonetheless. That is why the apostle urges us to take care:

¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. ¹³Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. (Ephesians 6:11-13, RSV)

This business of having “an army encamped against me” is no joke. Most times, we make it through the day feeling okay, rather unaware of the dangers that surround us. But sometimes, it is as if the veil is moved aside and then we sense that things are not entirely under control. I think that the recent waves of violence in our land have rocked many of us. Murders and suicides and terrorism, gunfire and death in schools, malls, and movie theatres: these things make us wonder what is happening to our land. And what will the future hold?

On the personal level, from time to time we might wonder whether the emotional wounds of childhood or various cognitive or physiological deficiencies we suffer are going to overwhelm us in the end. Or are we going to be defeated by enemies or employers or neighbors who dislike us?

For Jesus himself, he seems to have walked in the midst of opposition all the time. His hometown neighbors got mad and tried to throw him off a cliff. (Luke 4:29). The devil took off the gloves and tempted Jesus in the wilderness, as we read last Sunday. (Matthew 4) Demons screamed at him:

And, behold, they cried out, saying, What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God? art thou come hither to torment us before the time? (Matthew 8:29, KJV)

And Satan entered one of his own disciples and moved him to betray him:

³Then entered Satan into Judas surnamed Iscariot, being of the number of the twelve. ⁴And he went his way, and communed with the chief priests and captains, how he might betray him unto them. (Luke 22:3-4, KJV)

There was something about Jesus that moved some of the best and most powerful people in his world to oppose him, so that from time to time Jesus was opposed by Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, lawyers, even high priests. Throughout his young life, Jesus was encompassed by enemies, and he knew it.

Yet, he did not give up. His courage was such that he pressed on with steady step, always seeking our salvation. Though Jesus was opposed and encamped about by enemies, he continued his path and put his trust in his heavenly Father:

²²He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips.

²³When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. (1 Peter 2:22-23, RSV)

Indeed, St. Paul gives the most beautiful words to express the spirit of boldness in which Jesus walked, for it is Jesus himself who is the original model of the courage St. Paul recommends. Jesus above all is the one who can look at the surrounding enemy and boldly declare:

³¹If God be for us, who can be against us?... ³⁸For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, ³⁹Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God... (Romans 8, KJV)

So, let an army be encamped against Jesus. His courage is such that he continues his fight for our salvation.

THIRD, MY FATHER AND MY MOTHER FORSAKE ME

Let's take a look at the third of my verses from Psalm 27:

¹⁴Though my father and my mother forsake me,
the Lord will sustain me.

In Shakespeare's play Julius Caesar, what was the unkindest cut of all?

Et tu, Bruté? — Then fall, Caesar. (Act III, Scene 1)

If this, a friend, should betray him, then all is lost:

For when the noble Caesar saw *him* stab,
Ingratitude, more strong than traitors' arms,
Quite vanquished him: then burst his mighty heart, (Act III, Scene 2)

Likewise, our Lord Jesus knew betrayal:

But Jesus said unto him, Judas, betrayest thou the Son of
man with a kiss? (Luke 22:48, KJV)

If so, then, Peter, lay aside your sword:

¹¹Then said Jesus unto Peter, Put up thy sword into the
sheath: the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not
drink it? ¹²Then the band and the captain and officers of the
Jews took Jesus, and bound him (John 18:11-12, KJV)

But it was not just Judas who let down our Lord. So did all his disciples, the ones he called his "friends":

And they all forsook him, and fled. (Mark 14:50, KJV)

Who could have blamed Jesus then if his mighty heart had burst, and he had given up his good fight? Who could have blamed him if he had cried, "This is enough! I give up on this human race!"

But the courage of Jesus seems to have been nourished not only by the loyalty of his friends, but by a loyalty even more solid. His disciples might abandon him, his friends might forget him, but he knows that his heavenly Father will never do such a thing:

Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. (Isaiah 49:15, NRSV)

So Jesus labors on. He knows that he is surrounded by threats, by devilish forces, and by disloyal friends. But also he knows that in seeking to save humanity he is following the will of his heavenly Father, and he is willing to commit the matter over to him.

YOU AND ME

For all we know, this coming week, or this coming year, sometime ahead of us, you and I are going to face a terrible threat. We are going to be tempted to turn and run away, to abandon the way of our Lord Jesus. We will be frightened and wonder whether we should give up the fight for our family, for ourselves, for our world. Should we cut and run? Should we lie low?

When such a trying time comes, let us cling even more firmly to Jesus and commend ourselves to him. Let it be with us as it was with him, that he feared Herod and feared all of heaven and earth *less* than he feared losing you and me. This brave One lives, even after his cruel death on the Cross, and so now “a champion fights at our side.” We have him on at side, and let us use his company to make us more brave in this world, under the protection of Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.