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

This morning’s sermon is about the courage of Jesus in face of terrible danger. Here is my Bible text for this sermon:

At that very hour some Pharisees came, and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” Ἀπὸ τοῦτοι δὲ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς τὸν αἰωνίον: Ἱσραήλ, καὶ ἀνάρτηθεν αὐτῷ. (Luke 13:31-32, RSV)

My sermon, then, is about the courage and faith of Jesus in face of danger. But let me begin with an observation about the Pharisees, because after all, fair is fair. My observation is this: Not all Pharisees opposed Jesus. Some of them befriended him by inviting him to their homes ¹, and, in this morning’s story, some Pharisees tried to protect him. This speaks well both of Jesus and of the Pharisees. Those folks – the Pharisees – were especially devoted to the holy law of God. They sought to encompass all of daily life within divine law. They were respected people, especially by the common folk of the land. They were respected for their piety. That they would be good to Jesus reflects well on Jesus and on them. It suggests that at least some Pharisees recognized a kindred spirit in Jesus. Jesus was the kind of man they could honor. They tried to protect Jesus from King Herod. They seem to worry for Jesus and to want to save him from Herod.

So, I begin with this point about the Pharisees, trying to give credit where credit is due. But now let me turn to my main theme: Jesus is brave. We follow a Savior who has courage deep in his bones.

May I suggest that this morning’s story about Jesus dismissing Herod as “that fox” is a public and fast-paced version of the much slower and more intimate story of Gethsemane? The Gethsemane scene occurs later, much closer to the death of Jesus. We are in the year of St. Luke. As Luke tells the story of Jesus in that hard night of prayer, our Lord was terribly troubled by his approaching cup of suffering. St. Luke speaks of the sweat on Jesus as he prayed that he might be spared that cup. The Evangelist writes this:

And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. (Luke 22:44, KJV)

Jesus sought the prayers of Peter, James, and John. He admitted to them that he was struggling:

Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me. (Matthew 26:38, KJV)

But those disciples could not keep up with him. They fell asleep, while Jesus went on praying that he might be spared his oncoming cup of suffering.

The courage of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane is revealed in the final words of his prayer:

Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. (Luke 22:42, KJV)

“Not my will, but thine, be done.” These are always the words of a faithful Christian. We pour out our hearts to our heavenly Father, but leave the outcome to his wisdom and his love.

The Gethsemane scene is an intimate picture of the courage of Jesus. It shows us something of what it cost Jesus to be brave at the approach of his own death. But it is the same courage as that on display in this morning’s Bible story. When Jesus called Herod “that fox” and declared his intention to continue his path, it was the same courage as when Jesus ended his night of prayer with the words, “not my will, but thine, be done.” It is this courage that I hope to explore in this morning’s sermon.

To begin, I would like to take advantage of this morning’s Psalm — Psalm 27. Especially let me lift up the opening verse of that Psalm. Verse 1 goes this way:

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? (Psalm 27:1, LBW)

My idea is this: The courage of Jesus consists in the fact that he could care more about his heavenly Father than he cared about the threats of Herod or even the brutality of the Cross. Jesus had the capacity to keep his eye on the promises of God, no matter what else was going on in his life. The crashing thunder and the fierce lightning of threats and dangers and looming suffering could not tear Jesus away from the peaceful promises of God. Let’s take a look at those promises in Psalm 27, verse 1.
The first half of the verse speaks of light:

1The LORD is my light and my salvation;

When those friendly Pharisees came to Jesus to warn him of Herod, it would have been natural for Jesus to see storm clouds coming his way. It is not nice to have the king wanting to kill you. Right then and there, Jesus could have sensed the commencing of gloom and darkness. Our reading this morning is from Luke 13. But Jesus has known for some time that he is destined for great suffering. Back in Luke 9, Jesus had foretold his disciples about his coming death:

The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (Luke 9:22, NRSV)

Now, in Chapter 13, Jesus has reason to sense his approaching end. King Herod wants to kill him. He has reason to see the approach of the darkness he had foretold.²

But Jesus does not turn aside from his path. He says that he “goes his way”:

“Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. 33Nevertheless I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following... (Luke 13:32-22, RSV)

Jesus will not permit himself to be dissuaded from his ministry. He came to save humanity. He will not permit the gathering darkness to frighten him away from his life’s work. In his determination to go on, Jesus is brave. In face of all thick darkness, gathering gloom, and approaching suffering, Jesus keeps his eye on the promise of this morning’s Psalm—a Psalm that speaks of light, whatever the darkness of this world:

1The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?

² And so it is that our dramatic Maundy Thursday liturgy ends in a darkened church, along with the lament we imagine in the heart of Jesus:

19My friend and my neighbor you have put away from me, and darkness is my only companion. (Psalm 88, LBW)
“Whom then shall I fear?” Answer? Jesus shall not fear Herod! Jesus shall not fear Pilate. He shall not fear the guards, nor the soldiers, nor the mocking crowds, nor the hammers, nor the spikes. Though his heart might be beating wildly, a mile a minute, and though he might be grieving and in agony of spirit, nonetheless, “who shall I fear? for the Lord is my light and my salvation.” Nothing can take that light away from Jesus. He puts his confidence in his heavenly Father, and so nothing shall frighten him overmuch! The LORD is light for Jesus. The LORD is so much light that he will scatter whatever darkness Herod and Pontius Pilate can muster. And therefore Jesus will not be afraid. Therefore Jesus will continue his path. He will continue his good work of salvation.

Frightening things can happen to us human beings. There is not enough light in our world. There is too much darkness of spirit, too much grimness of crime, too much shadiness of greed, too much gloom of illness and poverty. Far too much!

But also we live in a world in which we have the right to make Psalm 27 our own. In face of all darkness and terror, we have the right to say,

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

And so, that one, let us say, who has won your heart and perhaps you hoped someday to marry… that one turns to you and says, Goodbye. And with that simple goodbye, your world feels as if it is crashing down. Your future looks gloomy. Then, if we would follow the example of Jesus, we will say, “I go on. The Lord will be my light and my salvation. He will be with me. Better times will come. I go on, today, tomorrow, the third day, and as long as life lasts.”

Or the boss calls you into his office and delivers the bad news. “I have to let you go. I will write you a good letter of reference, but we cannot keep you. There just isn’t enough money.” And you stand there, in your middle age, racking up the years, understanding the boss’s stance, but wondering whether you will be able to find another job. You have reason for fear — of course you do! But also you have reason for confidence. You have a reason to go on, today, tomorrow, third day, and for as long as your heart beats, for you belong to Jesus, who has walked your path before you and who lives to accompany you now on your path. Walk on, then, and see what the future brings you… see what Jesus does with you. Keep on peddling. In the end, he will save you, no doubt about that, because he is your light. As St. John says, Jesus is “the light of the world” (John 1:9).

Or the doctor comes back into his office, sighs, and says, “I am afraid the results are not good. You are in for a hard time, and I am not sure that you
will make it.” And, unless Jesus comes again soon, eventually we will not make it! Eventually the darkness will gather for us, and we will close our eyes, not in sleep, but in death. What darkness that is, the devil would love to whisper in our ears. But then, the devil always wants us to forget about Jesus, the very Light of this world. Do not let him! Let nothing deprive you of your faith in Jesus and in his ability to cause all things to work together for your good.

Whatever our circumstances in life, let us enjoy the days granted to us. Let us walk on, today, tomorrow, and as long as life lasts. Let us imitate the courage of Jesus who persevered in his path, doing good day by day. Let us defy all discouragement and take our stand with Jesus, who is indeed our light and our salvation, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.