

FEEL THE FEAR AND KEEP GOING

the Rev. Dr. DeWayne L. Davis

Lead Minister

March 13, 2022

Text: Luke 13:31–35

When Jesus' religious opponents approached him to warn him to leave and go somewhere else because Herod wanted to kill him, I believe they were well-intentioned. I think they genuinely feared for Jesus' life. And they had every reason to. Herod was a notoriously petty, insecure, brutal tyrant who had already imprisoned and beheaded the prophet John the Baptist. Though members of the religious establishment had vehemently disagreed and sparred with Jesus and plotted against him to stop his ministry, they knew that the danger from Herod was real and looming. And they were afraid.

But you see, fear can often cloud the perception of things, preventing fearful people from seeing the bigger picture. In the case of Jesus' religious opponents, first because of their defensiveness and now because of their fear, they failed to see that Jesus was on a divinely ordained path heading to an appointed destination (that place to which he was heading) and destiny (that place where he will inevitably end up if he stays on this path). Early on, the evangelist of the Gospel of Luke says that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (9:51). Jerusalem was a city with a troubled history and reputation for violent rejection of God's prophets. But the path on which Jesus traveled to preach the gospel God gave him would lead him inexorably to that very city, whatever awaited him there.

That Herod was threatening Jesus wasn't a surprise to him. Jesus knew that to preach the gospel he preached, to proclaim a gospel of liberation from bondage, was to risk resistance, rejection, and even death. But he has a mission and work to do: a mission and work that threatens the status quo and embodies the promise to which his mother testified when she sang that God would bring the powerful down from their thrones. Herod had no intention of being brought down from his throne and would kill to protect his power.

I often wonder if Jesus felt any fear. We are taught that the Anointed One knows no sin and no fear. But psychologists and anthropologists remind us that fear is the earliest human emotion. In our awareness of danger, we instinctually seek to secure and protect ourselves. At the same time, humans are creative and ingenious in concealing and coping with fear. Could this explain Jesus' reaction? It has to be frightening, just as it was to those who warned Jesus, to know that someone with the power, history, and tendency to kill has their sights set on you. Without relying too much on our post-Easter faith in concluding that Jesus was never afraid, I want to think that Jesus found assurance in the sacred writings of his tradition. I hear the Psalmist singing it with blessed assurance, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident" (Psalm 27:1, 3). Perhaps Jesus felt fear, and he kept going. He kept serving, healing, and teaching.

In response to the warning about Herod, Jesus evinced no fear, no doubt, no hesitation about his journey and ministry. Even with the understanding that this journey he was on would lead to a dangerous place, he shows no hatred or anger toward those who would reject him. Jesus has no compulsion to act in a way to save himself or make his life easier. No, Jesus' attitude is a remarkable demonstration of what it means

to be oriented to God completely, to know the path on which one has been called, to trust that the destination and destiny are ordained such that he could retort in the face of the threat: "I've been healing and delivering vulnerable people from bondage and will continue to do that as long as God allows. No matter what Herod intends to do, no matter the threats, I will continue to do this ministry." Oh, Jesus is not worried about Herod because his destination is Jerusalem and that's where his fate will be decided. Rather than give in to any fear, anger, or worry about this credible threat, Jesus laments. He cries over the city and the people who reject him.

In lamentation and compassion, Jesus cries out about how he wishes to nurture and protect the people of Jerusalem like a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings. In response to threat and rejection, Jesus shows love and determination, not fear. In all the good he was doing, his journey was filled with threats. His journey to Jerusalem allowed him to serve the very vulnerable, challenging the status quo and business as usual such that people would want to kill him. And yet, Jesus knows what he must do. His expression of lament and compassion reveals a more expansive view of God even as danger looms. Yes, God is our redeemer, but God also nurtures and protects us like a mothering hen. Whom shall I fear?

Fear is inimical to the work of love, justice, and compassion. The threat of fear is so insidious that God, Jesus, and the angels consistently and repeatedly reassure people to fear not or to not be afraid throughout the biblical witness. If Jesus had given in to the fear, he would not have had time to heal the sick, deliver people from bondage, or teach his followers about the reign of God in parables. If Jesus were motivated by fear, he would have given in to the earlier temptations in the desert to secure himself from the danger and the challenges from Herod and from the rulers and the chief priests who will eventually hand him over. If Jesus had allowed fear to overwhelm him, he would have been too preoccupied with securing himself to show compassion and the desire to nurture and protect those who rejected him. If Jesus had let the fear take hold, he would have turned his face away from Jerusalem. Jesus kept going.

As a church, over the last few years, we have been on a journey whose destination and destiny are not entirely clear, but we have been called to purposes which take us on the path to do the hard work of justice. We have been looking at what growth in our community would look like. We have engaged in some hard discussions about making our space and place more radically hospitable and welcoming. We have been interrogating symbols, practices, and traditions we took for granted were harmless if not life-affirming. We have been confronting our complicity in erecting, supporting, and maintaining structures of supremacy, whether racially, religiously, or economically. We have been debating what it means to be faithful stewards of our abundance in ways that honor God and honor the purpose for which we gather as beloved community. We are now talking about how to forecast the values and commitments that may invite and entice people to give us a chance to be their community. And every potential for change, transformation, and liberation within these walls can be frightening. There are threats, external and internal, that will always offer us a chance to stop what we are doing or to turn back or focus inward. But that's why we should take Jesus at his word and embrace a more expansive view of God. On this path we travel, we can trust that God nurtures and protects us.

This season calls us to reflect on the path we are traveling and face any fear that arises on our present course. Lent is a time for questions and reflection about paths, destinations, and destinies. It involves testing spirits, making small surrenders, and taking on new disciplines, all in the effort to orient ourselves to God's liberating and justice-making reign. We take this journey and set out on a path we did not plan or expect to be on, with our faces oriented toward destinations and destinies we are not entirely sure will be what we envision. Human intelligence and ingenuity have afforded us imaginative ways to protect ourselves and secure our future. We can push fear to the back of our minds, secure in the knowledge that we have done everything in our power to be ready for those dangerous foxes lying in wait for us or those Herods seeking to kill us. So fortified against what frightens us, we often do not have to exercise that faith muscle of abiding in the reassurance that God is not only our redeemer but also the one who nurtures and

protects us like a mothering hen. But I pray we exercise that faith and trust in a God who nurtures and protects, that we keep going even when the threats are acute and the fear threatens to immobilize us.

Yet, we are on a path. We have a destination and destiny. The course will be winding and often treacherous, and there are dangers seen and unseen threatening to throw us off that path. Every good work we do that reflects God's liberating and justice-making vision for the world, every act of justice and service we render, and as long we keep our face set on what God calls us to do, we will be met with resistance, rejection, and fear. And the biggest threat to our work is our fear. Fear is the insidious force that can rob of us our resolve, our commitments, and our imagination. Fear is the distraction that makes it difficult to love and show compassion. We do not fear. The Lord is our light and our salvation, who nurtures and protect us. We'll keep going.