

Sermon: Whom shall I fear?

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles PC, March 13, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Alexei Navalny is a Russian activist who has become prominent in opposing the corrupt regime of President Vladimir Putin. On August 20, 2020, he was poisoned during a flight from Tomsk to Moscow, apparently from a nerve agent administered by a FSB spy, in an assassination attempt orchestrated most likely by Putin himself.

In the days leading up to the poisoning, Navalny had published a number of YouTube videos, expressing his support for pro-democracy protesters in Belarus. He had written that the same kind of revolution that was taking place in the neighbouring country would soon happen in Russia. His pro-democracy stance, and his rather effective reporting of corruptions within the upper echelon of the Russian government has alarmed the authority sufficiently that attempt on his life was made, and that sadly was not the first time. Evidently, Navalny has been dealing with attacks from the government, in one form or another for quite a number of years.

Navalny did recover eventually from the poisoning, after receiving extensive treatment at a Berlin hospital. However, he insisted on returning to Russia, to continue his work in opposition to Putin. Upon returning to his home country in early 2021, he was promptly arrested, charged, then sent to prison.

I wonder where Navalny finds the courage to that line of work? I wonder what it is like to know that someone is out to get you, and that someone happens to be the most powerful man in one's own country. How does one cope? How does one go about doing one's work, while looking over your own shoulder constantly? Knowing that at any moment, any passerby, any cup of tea or package received could be your last.

That type of worry, that type of anxiety, or fear, is debilitating. It causes one to melt, to tremble, to be paralyzed or to faint. It is not something I could ever identify with or understand. But apparently Jesus did. He was warned by some Pharisees, in Luke 13, to "*Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.*"

This is not the first nor the last time that Luke evoked the power of Herod. One could even argue that the gospel writer had synchronized his work with the Herodian dynasty. The birth of John in the days of Elizabeth and Zechariah was marked by the rule of King Herod the Great (1:5). The beginning of the ministry of Jesus took place under the shadow of Herod Antipas (3:1). Herod imprisoned John the baptizer (3:19), and executed him (9:7-9). Jesus would eventually face a trial before Herod, who had wanted him to 'perform some sign' (23:8). Based on their shared treatment of Jesus, Herod and Pilate would overcome their political differences and become friends (23:12). Furthermore, in Acts 12, Herod Agrippa, yet another king, had laid his violent hands upon the early church. His grisly death by worms was a fitting end to his arrogant reception of divine praise (12:23)

So when some Pharisees came and warned Jesus that 'Herod wants to kill you', one has to keep that historical context in mind in assessing that particular threat. The Herodian dynasty is ruthless, merciless, power hungry and blood thirsty. These heartless kings would give no second thoughts to killing babies and prophets alike, just to maintain their hold on power. So one could only conclude that threat as credible, imminent, a clear and present danger that should not be taken lightly. Fear would've, should've been the rightful response.

Yet Jesus retorted, in verse 32, "*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.'*"—kind of like: 'Bugger off! Leave me alone to do my work!'

The origin of fear can be traced to the fall of humanity, particularly to Adam when he responded to God saying, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid" (Genesis 3:10). It is no exaggeration to say that after that terrifying moment in the garden, humanity has lived with the constant possibility or even the threat of fear.

Fear takes on many forms, some with highly technical terms. Allow me to name a few: Peladophobia: fear of baldness and bald people. Aerophobia: fear of drafts. Auroraphobia: fear of the northern lights. Thalassophobia: fear of being seated. Odontophobia: fear of teeth. Graphophobia: fear of writing in public. Levophobia: fear of objects on the left side of the body. Dextrophobia: fear of objects on the right side of the body. Phobophobia: fear of being afraid.

In a pastoral conversation, asking ‘what are you afraid of?’ is risky. It exposes vulnerability that many would rather hide. I came across one particular kind of fear early on in my previous pastoral charge in Montreal, as I was moving into the manse attached to the old church. The two teenage children, PKs or preacher’s kids and former residents of the manse had shared with me, in vivid details of their encounters with a ‘ghost’ or evil spirit inside the church building. The look on their faces told me they were indeed terrified, and were not making it up. I then prayed with them, tried to comfort them, but deep down inside, I was afraid myself and for my family—as Justin and Neo were still quite young at that time.

After discussing it with Daisy, we decided the first thing that we were doing as a family, when moving into the manse, was to take our kids to each corridor, and every dark corners of the church building and prayed. We couldn’t allow fear, or even the threat of fear in any form dictates our ministering to the congregation, so we prayed. We prayed for God’s cleansing, for God’s blessing, and for God’s protection. I am glad to say that none of us had seen any ghost, or encountered any nefarious spirit during the twelve years we lived there.

Psalmist in Psalm 27, states boldly in verse 1, “*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?*” One thing I love about psalms is its forthrightness. Psalms speak of real life situations faced by the people of God, with no coverings, no hesitations.

Fear, in the case of Psalm 27, came out of ‘when evildoers assail me to devour my flesh’. It came out of lived experience when ‘an army encamp against me’, or when ‘war rise up against me’. In ancient time, warfare is a terrifying ordeal for the besieged population. Invading army routinely slaughtered conquered people in the most brutal ways, just as a warning to all the nearby towns not to resist. Come to think of it, those kind of tactics may not be so ancient, considering what the Russian army is currently doing in Ukraine.

Yet the psalmist asks rhetorically ‘Whom shall I fear? Of whom shall I be afraid?’ Mixing into these verses, these real-life fears, are a number of faith statements: The Lord is my light and my salvation; the Lord is the stronghold of my life; my heart shall not fear; yet I will be confident. The Psalm speaks of an absolute trust in God, to overcome one’s adversities, to support and sustains one’s confidence, so one shall no longer fear. It speaks of dwelling in the house of the Lord, of finding shelter in times of

trouble. It beseeches God to not turn his face away, but to demonstrate active care. It asks God to teach the righteous path, so the people would walk confidently in the way of the Lord, unafraid.

‘Go and tell that fox...’ Jesus retorted when warned of Herod’s plan to kill him. Go and tell that fox to leave me alone, leave me do the job that I was sent by God. Is the fox cunning and clever, or is it wily and untrustworthy? The answer is probably a bit of both. Jesus then offered a metaphor of his own. He lamented over the people of Jerusalem, saying how he desires to gather them together, as ‘hen protects her brood under her wings’

In one simple exchange, Jesus set aside his own fear, set his sight on what he is sent to accomplish, and offers us a clear picture of the ministry of Christ, that is to protect those who are faithful,

Whom shall we fear, when we know that intention, the will of God? Of whom shall we be afraid, when we know that we are with God, that we are under her wings? However clever, wily, dangerous, or untrustworthy the fox maybe, or the lion, or bear, or whatever nefarious spirit, we shall have the confidence to stand firm, stand firm in the Lord.

Allow me to leave you with these words from the American missionary and theologian Dr. E. Stanley Jones,

*“I am inwardly fashioned for faith, not for fear.
Fear is not my native land; faith is.
I am so made that worry and anxiety are sand
in the machinery of life; faith is the oil.
I live better by faith and confidence than by fear, doubt and anxiety. In
anxiety and worry, my being is gasping for breath—
these are not my native air.
But in faith and confidence, I breathe freely—
these are my native air.”*

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