

“THE FOX IN THE HENHOUSE”

March 13, 2022

Luke 13:31-35

The Gospel reading for today is from Luke, Chapter 13, verses 31 through 35. At that very hour some Pharisees came, and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³² And he said to them, “Go and tell that old fox for me, “Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. ³³ Nevertheless I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following; for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.” ³⁴ O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! ³⁵ Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’”

*The Word of God for the People of God. **Thanks be to God.***

This is a piece of the story of Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem - from his home, if you will, toward his destiny. It also connects the story of Jesus with the movements and politics going on in his homeland in his own time. And this passage declares loudly who Jesus understood himself to be - a prophet, destined to die in Jerusalem. Today's piece of the story moves the plot along and secures it firmly to the history of first-century Palestine. But in our church year, we take these little snippets and reorganize them into a different kind of story - the story of our own journey through different aspects and stages of Christian life. If we look again at this piece of the story, with its odd animal-images, and think about its meaning for us during this special season of reflection and self-examination, maybe we can also use it to hold up a mirror to ourselves.

Can we slow down for awhile, let down our defenses just a bit, shift our attention, and open our hearts to enter the story? Or better - can we ask what this little bit of a story might be able to tell us about ourselves, about how we resist the call to love God with our whole heart, about how we set up barriers to the love of Christ?

So: the animal images. On the one hand, we have Herod, that old fox, lurking around the edges of the

Gospel of Luke, waiting for his chance to attack. Remember, he has already imprisoned and executed John the Baptist. Now he's worried that Jesus is John, come back from the dead. At the point of today's part of the story, he is beginning to hunt Jesus down.

It's tempting just to see Herod as one of the "bad-guys" of the gospel story, and to just dismiss him as the Enemy. But in the spirit of Lent, let's slow down, and let down our guard a little bit, and let's see whether we can see the picture from the point of view of Herod the fox. It's just possible that Herod might hold up a mirror for us. Think about the position Herod is in. He's called the *tetrarch* in charge of Galilee, the ruler. But really, he's just a puppet for the Roman Empire. He has *some* power, but it's always limited. If things get out of hand in his jurisdiction, he's going to be in trouble with Rome. So, the last thing he needs, at this point in the story, is anything that smacks of revolution.

Enter Jesus, the revolutionary prophet. Although it appears to us now that Jesus was not interested in anything like an armed revolution, still the things he was doing were challenges to the status quo. He *broke the law* by healing--by *working*--on the Sabbath. He repeatedly ignored his culture's codes of purity by touching the unclean and by eating with sinners. He consistently taught that even those who couldn't keep the holy Law were acceptable to God. These weren't just compassionate acts by a kind of do-gooder. Jesus was breaking the law, and he was attracting a following. All that was very certainly a threat to someone whose power was precarious, like Herod. And so, Herod resisted Jesus. He did what he could to make Jesus' mission difficult. He placed obstacles in the way. He hunted him. In the end, he helped to kill him. Can we understand that kind of resistance?

How do I react when someone challenges my most cherished values and the values of my family or my society? I've worked hard all my life to attain a certain level of comfort and security. How do I feel when someone tells me that my very comfort is a sign of my sinfulness? How do I feel when someone comes along and tells me that the company I work for is polluting the environment? I'm saving my money so that my children can have security in the future. How do I feel when someone comes along and tells me that I should be giving more away, to support those who seem not to want to work at all?

I may find that I'm not all that eager to run right out and embrace those prophets of social justice. And what about the voices that challenge me about my faith? How do I feel, for instance, when someone needles me about the many times blood has been shed in the name of Christianity?

How do I feel when someone says the church I belong to is just part of the Establishment, that it's just about pretty liturgy and feel-good theology, and that it has nothing to do with serving the poor or fighting for justice? How do I feel when someone asks me what I, personally, have been doing in the

name of Jesus Christ? How do I feel when I'm faced with challenges like these? Wouldn't these challenges shake *your* foundations a little?

So, in the spirit of Lent, let's take the time to let down our resistance to such challenges, and really listen to them and really assess whether they are calling for change on our parts. Because Jesus' voice is a lot like these voices. The question or the demand may be different to each one of us; the challenge to one person or community may not be the challenge to another. But the voice is the same voice Herod was hearing. It's the voice that challenges us on our fear.

I have to say that even as I was thinking up all those questions I just asked, I was feeling more and more defensive. I don't like having my security and my loyalties challenged. And I don't like thinking of Jesus as a sort of in-your-face revolutionary. But read the Bible. That side of Jesus is in there, all right. And he challenges us this Lent to take him seriously. So, let's sit with Herod for awhile, in his fear. Let's try on the costume of the fox.

There's another animal-image, of course, that we also encounter in today's little snippet of gospel. There is that wonderfully feminine image of Jesus the mother hen, longing to take the children of Jerusalem under his wings. It offers us a picture of God that we find appealing: a God who longs for us, who reaches out to gather us in. When we're feeling small and timid and lonely, that is an image of God that we find comforting. And yet Jesus says, "many times he has wanted to gather the children of Jerusalem under his wings, but they were not willing." Here is a motherly Jesus, Jesus making a broad, welcoming gesture, offering the kind of love and security that all people claim they want.

But the children of Jerusalem turn away and say No. This is a kind of resistance that may be more puzzling than the Herod-kind. It's easy to understand someone rejecting a prophet who points out how our drive for security can result in injustice. It may be a little harder to understand someone rejecting freely offered love.

But one of our most cherished idols in this society is the god of our independence. The kind of love God offers us is a terrible threat to that quintessentially American sense of freedom. If I take shelter under those outstretched wings, and let God enfold me, let God love me *with* all my imperfections and all my doubts and all my resistances and everything else -- if I allow God's love to fill my heart and take over my life, who then will I be? And will I be any different from anyone else?

This kind of resistance is slipperier. This is a resistance that isn't about how we spend our time or our money; it isn't about just or unjust things that we do. It's still a kind of fear, but it's about an intimate kind of fear. *It's about how we set our heart.*

This is the kind of resistance that encourages us just to sleep in on Sunday morning; it's that voice that *gnaws* at our faith not with *big questions*, but with *little objections*; it's the kind of fear that can lead us to choose to try to escape through escapism media or other kinds of addictive behavior rather than face the truth. It's the kind of fear that worries us about how we stack up, how we rate in the household of God. When we know that generation after generation of seekers after God have reported paths of faith that have worked for them, this is the voice that says, "Yes, that's ok for you, but *I'm different.*" I can't do it that way. I'll do nothing, instead.

So, we're on the road now - the Lenten road - with Jesus, traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem. And when we reach Jerusalem, when we've witnessed the great climax of Jesus' journey to the Cross, and when at Easter we've found that great stone rolled away, we'll want to be in a place where we can shout "Alleluia, the Lord is risen!"

But if our lungs are all bound up in barbed wire, the bondage of our resistance, our fear. If our lungs are all tied up like that, it'll be plenty hard to muster a really joyful shout! The bondage of these kinds of fear - it's strong, it's real. This isn't something that we can *will* ourselves out of *today, right now*. In fact, our Christian tradition assures us that we *aren't* called to release *ourselves* from resistance on our own. What we're called to do, rather, is simply place ourselves where the grace of God can work on us. That's where the season of Lent comes in.

This is the season to slow down, to quiet the voices inside our head, and get honest with ourselves about our fears. Take a biblical text, like today's; or read through one of the gospels - say, half a chapter a day - trying on images of God and images of human beings as they come up, to see what they say to us. Instead of worrying about unlocking the mysteries of scripture, just for Lent, let's let the scripture unlock the mystery of *us*. That is one way we can take the step to place ourselves at the disposal of the Holy Spirit.

And whatever form of resistance or fear may beset us, just because we're present, today, in this place, by whatever means, we're already taking the risk to place ourselves at our Lord's disposal. Jesus stands before us, as he always does, with arms outspread, waiting to welcome us, waiting to shelter us. His grace is free. He calls us only to say yes.