

“FOXES AND HENS”

Luke 13:31-35

Our journey towards the cross is just few weeks away and we are now beginning to feel the tension. Jesus is slowly moving out from his ministry in Galilee and traveling towards Jerusalem; the place where he would encounter his political and religious enemies and eventually his death. In this passage, we see Jesus pouring out his feelings and emotions. We hear of the Pharisees acting like local sympathizers and have warned Jesus to “get away from Jerusalem because Herod wants to kill him.” Was it their real intent to warn Jesus so he could be spared from Herod’s wrath? One scholar pointed out that the Pharisees wanted Jesus to move out of Jerusalem because Jesus was a threat to Pax Romana the peace project imposed by Rome. Jesus’s presence might incite a rebellion in full proportions. I feel strongly that the Pharisees were scared of Jesus’ popularity and what that might do to their safety net: “Let’s get Jesus out of here! We don’t want the wrath of Herod and the Romans be upon us!”

Instead of heading for the nearest hole to hide, Jesus sends the Pharisees to relay a message for Herod Antipas, Jesus did not mix his words and he means business: "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.' According to the Hebrew scriptures, when the reign of God arrives, the signs of its coming would be healing of the sick, justice for the oppressed and the defeat of evil. And so, as Jesus went about the countryside curing sick people and driving out demons, Jesus was understood as bringing God’s reign a reality right there In Herod’s own back yard of Galilee. Jesus believes that there is a greater force than Herod at work in the world. Jesus has business in Jerusalem. But it will be on his timetable, not Herod’s.

Between 1953 to 1955, a Roman Catholic Franciscan church was built on the foothill of Mount Olives, facing the old city of Jerusalem called Dominus Flevit which is Latin for “The Lord has wept” symbolic of Jesus’ crying over Jerusalem. The church building is shaped as a teardrop which embodies Jesus’ lament and sorrow for the city that he loved. Inside the sanctuary of the church adorning its altar was a circular mosaic artifact believed to be created in the 7th century. The most dominant image of the mosaic is that of a hen – standing tall and courageous, her wings stretched wide. Under the wings are chicks gathered at her feet. Along the circumference of the mosaic is a Latin inscription of Jesus’ words: “Jerusalem! Jerusalem! How often have I desired to

gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” Those last words— “you were not willing” — are intentionally placed at the bottom of the mosaic, in an area where all the tiles are red, perhaps like spilled blood, at the hen’s feet. Besides the hen and the chicks, there is another character in this picture. Although it is not visible in the mosaic, you might imagine it lurking out of sight, waiting to strike. That other character is the Fox that threatens the Chicks.

I do wonder why Luke chose hen as a metaphor for Jesus? Why not a lion or a bear or even a mighty eagle? The lectionary group believes that lions, bears, eagles - all portray power, prestige and affluence – three things that symbolize what a typical Messiah would be. Jesus, on the other hand was the opposite. He was humble and non-violent, yet strong and compassionate like a mother hen. Barbara Brown Taylor offers an exceptional answer to my question: *“A hen is what Jesus chooses, which– is pretty typical of him. He is always turning things upside down, so that children and peasants wind up on top while kings and scholars land on the bottom... So of course he chooses a chicken, which is about as far from a fox as you can get. That way the options become very clear: you can live by licking your chops or you can die protecting the chicks... Jesus won’t be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first.”*

Herod is the fox. In Hellenistic thought, the fox is regarded as clever but sly and unprincipled. Foxes are generally seen as cunning and sneaky animals. My concept of foxes comes primarily from Aesop’s Fables particularly the story of the fox and the crow, where the fox flattered the crow who found a piece of cheese. The fox sweet-talked the crow by saying that the crow has a beautiful voice. The crow took the bait and lets out a squawk, the cheese of course falls straight to an open-mouthed fox who ate it. A fox could also be someone who is cruel, arrogant and one who shows no-mercy like in the story of the fox who enticed the gingerbread man to cross the river ending in the tragic devouring of the gingerbread man. In that same manner, we sense Jesus’ anger and disgust with "that fox" Herod—sly, cunning and manipulative. Who is this Herod that Luke is talking about in this story?

About five years ago, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem premiered the first ever exhibition of Herod "the Great", including 250 artifacts from his tomb. Herod the Great was an ambitious builder, and a few recent biographies have tried to rehabilitate his reputation, but most historians remember him as a paranoid and ruthless madman. He murdered one of his ten wives, two of his sons, and numerous opponents. But the Herod in this particular story in Luke is Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great. Herod Antipas is the same Herod spoken of by Matthew - the one responsible for slaughtering the infants; the one who tricked the Magi to inform him where the infant Jesus was; the one who beheaded John the Baptist out of a whim. Foxes like Herod Antipas are the ones who create mistrust and fear, betrayal and confusion, yes even deaths of innocent people.

Yet Jesus ignored the warnings of his death and did not back down. In those moments of self-reflection and encounter, Jesus had an outburst of emotions. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" Sometimes it is difficult for some of us to see this maternal and emotional sides of Jesus. St. Anselm of Canterbury spoke freely of Jesus as a mother when he said: *"But you, Jesus, good Lord, are you not also a mother? Are you not that mother who, like a hen, collects her chicks under her wings? Truly master, you are a mother. For what others have conceived and given birth to, they have received from you...It is then you, above all, Lord God, who are mother."* Like a mother who is anguished by the wrongdoings of her children, Jesus wept. Jesus wept for Jerusalem. He wept for the people who were gone astray. He cried for the prophets before him, slaughtered in the name of God. He cried for the oppressed people, living in misery and economic poverty. Jesus wept. Jesus showed us how to be angry and how to feel pain and to express them with tears.

Today is St. Patrick's Day. Those of you who know their Irish history will recognize a hen versus fox element in the life of this patron saint of Ireland. Born as Maewyn Succat to Roman parents in Britain in charge of the colonies, Patrick grew up with a silver spoon. As a teen he was kidnapped by Irish pirates and sold into slavery in Ireland to herd and tend sheep owned by a Druid landlord. During his six-year captivity, he was beaten and mistreated but he did not give up. He became fluent in the Irish language, abandoned his pagan religion and he was converted to

Christianity. He escaped after having a dream sent from God in which he was told to leave Ireland and return to Britain. But he left his home and lived in a monastery for 12 years, became a bishop and then returned to Ireland with a passion to convert the pagans to Christianity. He was successful in his mission despite the many backlashes and difficulties he experienced. He encountered many foxes in his life, escaped so many deaths but he remained like a hen who welcomed everyone under his wings. Patrick preached and converted all over Ireland for 40 years and died on March 17, 462. That's why March 17 is celebrated as St. Patrick's Day.

Foxes and hens – sadly this is still the world's reality. Foxes kill chickens, because they are hungry, and chickens, flightless birds who are fenced into people's yards, are an easy meal. Like the violent massacre of Muslims praying in the mosques in New Zealand. Like the hate crimes targeting Muslims, Jews and Black congregations in Ottawa. Like the children and young ones detained in the US family detention centres forcibly separating immigrant families at the border. If Herod is a fox and Jesus is a hen . . . well, you don't have to be a farmer to know how that story turns out. Which leads us into the next episode of the Lenten story—that bloody mess of violence and crucifixion coming up on Good Friday. But we're not there yet. And this I know – as long as you and I and many out there commit to be mother hens that gather chicks under their wings – mother hens who champion the rights of others, mother hens who fill the world with love, peace, justice and compassion, mother hens who choose to stand their grounds and say no to injustice and acts of violence, the foxes out there will not win. The foxes will not in control as much as they think they are. Let us embrace the Way of the Hen — the way of Jesus that follows the road of inclusion, acceptance and reconciliation. So that it won't be a tyranny of fear and anger that dictates the course of our future. Let God enfold us into the tender, passionate love of a mothering hen. Amen.

Sources that helped me with my sermon:

- **BCUC Lectionary Group**
- **The writings of St. Anselm, Barbara Brown Taylor & Mardi Auld Glass, Ray Medeiros**
- **Aesop's Fables – The Fox & The Crow; The Fox & the Gingerbread Man**