

Lent 2, 2016

The Fox and the Hen

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My friend Joan, who lives up in Sturgeon Bay, emailed some photos she'd shot in her backyard of a fox with her two kits. The mother fox was beautiful. It looked remarkably well-fed; her coat was sleek and her tail lush and full. Joan wages regular warfare on rabbits which wreak havoc on her beautiful garden, so she was thrilled to have a fox's den nearby to help keep down the bunny population. I suspect, though, that if she were raising chickens in her backyard, her feelings about the fox would be quite a bit different. Like any predator, foxes are opportunists. They don't want to work any harder than they have to, and will eat whatever is close at hand and easy to catch. A speedy rabbit verses a generally flightless bird and her totally helpless chicks? That's a no-brainer if you're a fox.

We're in the 13th chapter of Luke in today's gospel. Four chapters ago was the account of the Transfiguration. We heard that two Sundays ago. And since coming down from that mountain, Jesus has done two things: he has turned his face toward Jerusalem. And he has doubled down on his efforts to reveal the Kingdom of God to his followers. That revelation has involved a lot of counterintuitive parables; it's involved a lot of healing; and it's involved a lot of deliverance. In the world view of first century Israel, deliverance was understood as releasing people from demon possession. These days, we might understand it better as Jesus shining a light on those things that oppress us – whether brought about through one's own chronic condition, or brought about through religious or political or economic systems that keep people trapped in despair.

And his ramped up teaching and ministry have not gone unnoticed. In our gospel for today some Pharisees warn Jesus about Herod. It's a curious detail in that Jesus and the Pharisees didn't exactly see eye to eye on a great many things. But as much as Jesus's actions in Galilee raised the collective eyebrows of the Law-abiding Pharisees, he at least was not the pretender on the throne of David that Herod was. To the Pharisees at this point in the gospel, Jesus was an irritant; their real enemies in Judaism were the Herodians – the elite who did not rigorously follow the Torah and who actually supported the reign of Herod. Jesus chose his words carefully when he replied to the Pharisees, "Go and tell that fox for me..." Herod was wily enough to insinuate himself into the good graces of both the Roman Empire and the religious leadership, and opportunistic enough to do whatever it took to keep his power and his privilege. His presence on the throne smoothed the way for continued Roman occupation in Israel. His friends were rewarded; his enemies – like John the Baptist – were dispatched. In this way, he colluded with those who oppressed the people he allegedly ruled. But as long as his belly was full and his palace in Jerusalem secure, he didn't much trouble himself with things like justice or mercy – hallmarks not only of the Torah but of Jewish kingship as well.

At this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus knows perfectly well that he is going to Jerusalem to die. He has revealed this now twice to his disciples. And if Herod is the fox, then surely Jesus himself has the attributes of the mother hen he likens himself to – the one who longs to draw Jerusalem to himself the way a hen gathers her brood of chicks under her wings. He knows that he has no defenses against all that Rome, and Rome's henchman Herod, will throw against him. It was for this journey to Jerusalem that he underwent the testing in the wilderness we heard in our gospel passage last week. Jesus indeed could have all the kingdoms of the world in his command, not by the paltry power of Satan but from God himself, if that were how God chose to operate. But the victory of God's Kingdom will not come about because the tables will be turned and oppressor will now be subjected to oppression. God's kingdom will not come about because God will choose to sanction

violence in order to put down violence. God Incarnate will subvert the powers of the world, not in some insane suicide mission – as it must surely have seemed to the Pharisees as well as to his disciples – but by loving creation enough to die for it. And more than that -- to teach and to heal and to deliver us from evil right up through Good Friday and the tomb and into the blazing light of resurrection.

In short, nothing will dissuade Jesus from his journey to Jerusalem. There, he will stretch out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross, that everyone might be drawn within the reach of his saving embrace. His disciples will scatter to safety like so many chicks whose mother is attacked by a fox. The teeth and claws of Roman occupation will do their opportunistic best to dispatch this troublesome rabbi whose subversive teaching must be put down at all costs. His body will be broken. His blood will be poured out. That day in Golgotha, the fox will appear to have won.

Appearances will be deceiving.