

“The Fox and the Hen” GPPC 3-17-19
Psalm 27, Luke 13:31-35

One thing scientists have learned about human beings is that we often jump to conclusions. We make assumptions as a kind of intellectual shorthand, and not always a bad thing. Our ancestors sometimes made assumptions for good reason and based on past experience. “Yes, I see that large black cat over there, and I know what a jaguar looks like, how and what they eat. So I assume all jaguars are dangerous, and I will act accordingly.” This reasoning should also apply when visiting a zoo.

Sometimes, of course, our assumptions are wrong, as happens with prejudice. “I had one or two bad experiences, and now I assume all the people of a particular race, gender, sexual orientation, political party, or college basketball cheering section, are terrible.” This is not true.

If you happened to see the sermon title today and didn’t know better, you might assume “The Fox and the Hen” is the name either of a swanky restaurant or a sleazy bar. Again, a wrong assumption.

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If you only get your news from one source, you may also make wrong assumptions. 21st century Christians would be wise to adopt an attitude of curiosity and to question some of the information we read and hear in the news. Is it true? Is it the whole story? What's the context? Where does this lead? As Jesus said, "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free." Consult multiple sources. Dig deeper.

So we approach the gospel story this morning. And here's the context. Just before our passage, Jesus is traveling through towns and villages. Someone asks Jesus, "Lord, will only a few be saved." And instead of giving what we expect, a reassuring response, "Don't you worry your pretty little head, everything's going to be just fine," Jesus says, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able." And then Jesus continues by talking about how we need to practice self-discipline and how "some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last." Assumptions obliterated.

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And then this morning, says Luke, “at that very hour” some Pharisees show up and tell Jesus, “Get away from here, because Herod wants to kill you.”

If you’ve read the Bible a little bit, you know the Pharisees are usually depicted as the sworn enemies of Jesus. Over and over they are in conflict with him. They try to trick him and trap him. And they make plans to destroy him. But here some Pharisees apparently try to keep Jesus from getting killed. Why? We don’t know for certain. Maybe they’re trying to frighten Jesus enough to leave. Maybe they are league with Herod in some way. Or maybe, as one scholar points out, “This reveals that the Pharisees are not a monolithic group...and at least ‘some’ Pharisees still desire to hear what [Jesus] has to say.” (Martha Moore-Keish in *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke, Vol. 2, 50*.) Check our assumptions at the door.

Notice how Jesus responds. He is not frightened. He does not run away. Instead, he says, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I’m casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work...’”

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Jesus answers the Pharisees' warning with his own message to be sent back to Herod. And his message is defiant. It even contains an insult. "Go and tell that *fox* for me." We are not completely certain what Jesus meant, but one professor says, "In Hellenistic thought, the fox is regarded as clever but sly and unprincipled. The Old Testament associates the fox with destruction." (Leslie J. Hoppe in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2*, 71.) So not only is Jesus not afraid of Herod but he even turns Herod's messengers into his *own* messengers and sends them back with an insult to the so-called "King" Herod.

You may remember Herod is actually a tetrarch of Galilee and never achieves the true rank of king, and that appears to infuriate him. A Bible expert says, Herod rules as "king of the Jews, a reign marked by his total loyalty to Rome, his grandiose and sometimes magnificent building programs, his family strife, and his harsh repression of any opposition." (Francisco O. Garcia-Treto in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, 385.)

Herod reminds us of all the two-bit tyrants and wannabe tyrants throughout history. He lives in envy and fear, even murdering some of

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his own family members. He operates by trying to scare his subjects into submission. And if that doesn't work, he turns to violence.

Why does Herod want to kill Jesus? Probably because he is afraid of Jesus, and Jesus is a threat to his power. But maybe Herod also realizes that he and Jesus have very different ideas about life and how it is to be lived.

Herod is all about “keeping order” at any cost. Who cares whose rights are trampled, as long as order is kept? And Herod is all about “economic success” for a small group at the top, the wealthiest and most powerful citizens of all. Who cares about those who are not at the top? It's all about using bullying to get his way as a toady for the Roman Empire. As one politician said, “*Real* power is—I don't even want to use the word—*fear*.”

Is that so?

How many elected representatives in our country will come to the end of their careers, look in the mirror, and say, “I had the chance to do what was right, but it was controversial, and it might have cost me re-election. So I did the wrong thing, because I was afraid.”? How many

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pastors will say, “I wanted to speak out for God’s justice and mercy, but I knew it might be unpopular and it might lose our church some members, and maybe send me packing. So I was quiet, because I was afraid.”? How many Christians will say, “I saw the injustice around me, someone being picked on at school, an unfair work practice, a rumor or a lie being spread, an elected representative behaving despicably, a public policy that I knew was hurting people, but I knew it might be difficult if I said something or did something. So I kept quiet and did nothing, because I was afraid.”?

Fear is what drives parents to cheat, lie, and bribe to get their unqualified children into the elite colleges and universities.

Fear turned to blind hatred is what leads people to murder our beloved Muslim brothers and sisters gathered for prayer.

When we obey the voice of fear instead of the voice of Jesus then we are listening to the fox.

But then there is the voice of Jesus. “Listen,” he says in his message for Herod, “I’m casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.”

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Basically Jesus says, “My ministry is to cast out evil and to heal brokenness in body, mind, and spirit. And I’m going to do that ministry. You’re not going to stop me. My ministry will be finished on the third day.” And Christians tend to interpret “the third day” as the resurrection day. In other words, Herod “that fox” is not going to stop Jesus, and nobody else is either, because he will be the crucified and resurrected Lord of the world.

But even Jesus feels some sadness about the way things are, the choices people make. He says, “After I’ve done my ministry here, I have to be on my way, because it’s impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.” Jesus knows about Jerusalem’s bloody history with prophets. So he mourns what might have been. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often I’ve desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

Jesus compares himself to a hen with her babies. In an ancient, patriarchal culture, it’s a remarkable image, isn’t it? I’ve read that hens will actually fight foxes to protect their babies, even give their lives for

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them. And that's what Jesus offers to do for the people of Jerusalem. To take them under his wings. To protect them not only from Herod but from themselves and their worst impulses. But they are not willing. Jesus sees this, and so his words are a lament.

The season of Lent is a good time for us to reflect upon our own lives and our own resistance to coming under the wings of Jesus. His invitation is for us to live with a kind of holy audacity. How are you and I living with holy audacity, a Christ-inspired courage? And how are we buying into the fox's tired old intimidation routine?

There's something unusual about the sanctuary of Guilford Park Presbyterian Church. At the ends of all the pews, the wooden communion table, the lectern, the pulpit, in locations around the room are hand-carvings into the wood, carved by church members and even one of the former pastors. You'll notice the lectern is carved in the shape of a great bird; it's an eagle. Visitors might assume that this is an American eagle, blending God and country into the worship space. But that's not the case. The eagle is actually a biblical image of God's power, God's watching over God's people, "the flight of the Gospel

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throughout the world,” says the carvings brochure in the church library.

So when we see that eagle, we might remember God’s watchful power.

You know, Jesus could have chosen that image, the eagle, to describe his care and his unrequited love for Jerusalem. But he did not. He chose the hen instead. Who knows why he chose the hen? But I suspect he chose to compare himself to a hen facing a fox, because the hen is such an unlikely image, such a kinder image, a more vulnerable image. Not an eagle slashing with its talons and ripping with its beak. But a hen watching over her babies. A hen ready to lay down her life for her little ones. An invitation for the followers of Jesus also to lay down their lives, if need be, to face the fox themselves.

This is not usually the kind of ministry that will be popular or build a mega-church where the cool kids and the cool grownups hang out. But Jesus says it’s faithful ministry. “Take up your cross and follow me,” he says in another place.

And if we do accept the invitation of Jesus to follow and to gather under the hen’s wings, sharing the hen’s ministry, casting out evil, bringing wholeness to the world, we know eventually there’s a parade

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coming. And at that parade, we'll sing, "Blessed is the one who comes
in the name of the Lord." That's what we'll sing. ©Jeff Paschal