

## “The Fox, the Hen, and the Chicks”

Luke 13:31-35

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Second Sunday in Lent

I really have very little firsthand experience with foxes, or with hens, or with baby chickens, but I'm going to give this a shot. Jesus talks about all three in today's Gospel passage, and we need to figure out what he's talking about. He says, “Go and tell that *fox* for me,” referring to the Governor of Galilee; two verses later he says “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a *hen* gathers her *brood* under her wings.” He's using metaphors from the animal world. Folks like me who grew up in a city – well, we just don't have as much knowledge of these critters as do those who grew up on farms!

Jesus also has some words to say about *prophets* and the city of *Jerusalem*, the city where he will be sentenced to death. He's on his way there now; a few chapters back, Luke said, “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” (Luke 9:51) Jesus's ministry in Galilee has come to an end; now he's walking to Jerusalem. “Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem.” (Luke 13:22) It's a journey of more than 100 miles on foot, so Jesus has a ways to go. Just like we are now heading, steadily, week after week, to Holy Week, so too is Jesus now heading, steadily, week by week, to the events that will lead to his death.

At this point he is still in the region of Galilee. Jesus receives a warning that he should “get away from here” because “Herod wants to kill you.” There are several different “Herod”s in the New Testament. The most famous is Herod the Great, the wicked king who – in an attempt to kill baby Jesus – “killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under.” (Luke 2:16) Herod the Great died nearly thirty years before Jesus began his ministry. Herod's will decreed that, upon his death, his kingdom would be divided into three parts, and three of his sons would each rule one part. Herod's son Archelaus gained control of Judea (where Jerusalem is), Samaria, and a region called Iturea (further to the south); Herod's son Philip gained control of certain regions north and east of the Jordan River; and Herod's son Antipas gained control of a region called Peraea (east of the Jordan River) and the region of Galilee, which contained the towns of Nazareth, Cana, Capernaum, and many other places where Jesus engaged in ministry. It is this last Herod, Herod Antipas, who now wants to kill Jesus.

This Herod is less well known to most people. He governed Galilee for about 40 years, from about 1 BC to AD 39. During his reign he rebuilt a city called Sepphoris, which was the administrative center of Galilee and which had been attacked and sacked by a group of bandits who were rebelling against Roman rule. The Romans brutally quashed that rebellion, and then Herod Antipas rebuilt and fortified Sepphoris, to give it additional protection. Sepphoris was *less than four miles* from Nazareth, where Jesus grew up. It is not mentioned anywhere in the New Testament, but its power, wealth, and influence would *certainly* have been felt by the residents of nearby Nazareth. I have to wonder if Jesus

ever visited Sepphoris, and if so, what he thought of all the Roman pomp and circumstance. Herod Antipas also built a brand-new city on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, which he called “Tiberias,” in honor of the Tiberius, the current Roman Emperor, and Herod Antipas moved his capital there. Tiberias was essentially a luxury resort for the Romans, with a nearby spa and hot springs.

What Herod Antipas is most known for – because it shows up in the New Testament – is what he did to John the Baptist, who was both a friend and a relative of Jesus. Herod Antipas was married to a princess of a neighboring kingdom, and he basically dumped that princess in favor of another princess, which started a little war. That second princess happened to be his sister-in-law, the former wife of his half-brother. John the Baptist said to him, “You can’t do that; it’s illegal,” because there’s a little law in Leviticus that says a man cannot marry the wife of his brother while that brother is alive. (Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21) Herod Antipas’s reply was basically, “Who cares; I can do whatever I want,” because he, like many other rulers throughout history, did what he felt like doing, regardless of whether was ethical or legal. To get back at John, Herod Antipas had him arrested and imprisoned in a desert fortress called Machaerus, where he was locked away for a year, or maybe two. Then, Herod’s princess-wife’s daughter asked for John’s head on a platter, and Herod Antipas consented to that request; he sent instructions to Machaerus to have John beheaded. And so died a very good and faithful man, a relative and friend of Jesus, all because he had the audacity to speak out against a ruler who didn’t care about the law.

Now, back in our Gospel story, Herod Antipas has set his sights on Jesus. “Herod wants to kill you.” Herod Antipas undoubtedly perceived Jesus as a threat. Here was a Jewish man who had gained a large following – like those bandits and rebels that caused problems for the Romans from time to time. Everyone knows this isn’t an empty threat. Herod Antipas was quite capable having people executed.

So this is why Jesus referred to him as “that fox.” He was cunning, opportunistic, and clever – characteristics often associated with foxes. And who knows what *else* Jesus may have said about him!

Jesus hears the warning, but it doesn’t faze him. He tells the Pharisees who bring him this warning to return to Herod with a message, basically saying: “Look, I’m busy. I’m healing people and casting out demons. I’m not going to get killed *here*.” Jesus thumbs his nose at the Roman governor.

Jesus knows something no one else knows: *he is going to die in Jerusalem*. Whether God had revealed this to him, or whether Jesus had special foresight, I have no idea; but he knows: *he will die in Jerusalem*. Herod Antipas has no authority in Jerusalem. The Governor there is Pontius Pilate.

Jesus refers to Jerusalem as “the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it” and says “it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.” We don’t know how most of the Old Testament prophets died, but we do know that there was a prophet named Zechariah who was killed in Jerusalem. This is not the Zechariah who has a book named for him in the Old Testament; this was a different Zechariah. About eight centuries before Jesus, Zechariah chastised the Israelite people for transgressing God’s commandments; the people had “abandoned the house of the Lord, the God of their ancestors, and served the sacred poles and the idols.” (2 Chronicles 24:18-22) The Israelite king ordered that Zechariah be “stoned ... to death in the court of the house of the Lord,” that is, in the sacred Temple in Jerusalem. Additionally, there are some legends that say the prophet Isaiah was cut into two pieces with a saw, by order of a different Israelite king. There may be a reference to that in the New Testament; the book of Hebrews relates that some of the prophets were “sawn in two” (Hebrews

11:37). So, yes, at least one prophet had been killed – executed! – in Jerusalem. Jesus knows: this is what will happen to him. Zechariah was stoned to death; Isaiah may have been cut in two; John the Baptist lost his head; and Jesus will be crucified – all executed because they dared to proclaim God’s Word.

This is, of course, what Jesus was trying to do – proclaim the Word of God. It is, in fact, what *any* responsible religious leader tries to do: proclaim God’s truth and God’s will to the people, regardless of whether they want to hear it or not, regardless of whether they *like* it or not. It is a holy calling, not one to be taken lightly, not one where those leaders should just acquiesce to forces and powers that try to silence them. How many kings, queens, governors, and emperors are there throughout the Bible who stood fundamentally opposed to God’s truth and God’s will? I haven’t counted – but it’s a *lot!*

Jesus has called Herod Antipas a *fox*; now he mentions a *hen* and her *chicks*. Talking about Jerusalem, he says: “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34) Once a hen lays her eggs, she sits on them, incubating them, keeping them warm and well-protected, ready at any moment to issue warning threats against any would-be predators. She typically just *stays* there, not leaving the nest, for the next few weeks until they hatch, and even beyond. The baby chicks imprint themselves on her, following her around, and learning from her how to tend to their needs. This is Jesus’s vision for Jerusalem; he envisions it as a city nurtured and strengthened by the Word of God. He’s the hen; all the people of Jerusalem are his chicks, *including* the ones who are resistant or who don’t want to listen or follow. He wishes, he hopes, he *prays* that they could be united and faithful to God. But the religious leaders, for the most part, have gone astray; and the political leaders, for the most part, just don’t care. The common people are left bereft. They need a mother hen.

So Jesus works with what he has. He gathers disciples, the way a hen gathers her eggs. He trains them, the way a hen teaches her babies. He equips them so they will be able to thrive without his physical presence, the way a hen nurtures chicks. He wants them to grow, to mature in faith and wisdom, to blossom with the fruit of the Spirit. He has their *best interests* at heart.

Stretching the metaphor, *we* are now the chicks. In Jesus, we have a “mother hen” who teaches us, trains us, nurtures us, guides us, and leads us; who wants us to grow, to mature in faith in wisdom, and to blossom with the fruit of the Spirit. Jesus wants us to *thrive* in our spiritual life. There are foxes out there who are set against God’s word and God’s will, and against anyone who seeks to *listen* to God’s word and *do* God’s will. It can be *dangerous* to be a person of righteousness and faith, to seek to do what is *right* in all circumstances. We might not ever have to face a stoning, like Zechariah; or a saw, like Isaiah; or a beheading, like John; or a crucifixion, like Jesus; but there are still forces aligned against us. There are *foxes* out there that seek to devour us. Which is why it is oh-so-important that we put time and effort into learning from our mother hen, why it’s oh-so-important that we aim to follow in the ways of Jesus, imprinting ourselves on him, letting ourselves be trained and nurtured and corrected by him. He’s the one who’s going to help us more than anyone else. He’s the one who cares for us more than anyone else in the entire world. He’s the one who *loves* us so much that he’s willing to *fight the foxes* for us ... even if it will cost him his life.

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