

Paul Rader, First Presbyterian Church, Knoxville
Second Sunday of Lent, February 28, 2010, Luke 13:31-35

“The Fox and the Hen”

The Interpretation Commentary on Luke begins its analysis of our Gospel lesson by noting that “From a literary point of view, a warning and a lament are of quite different textures, but (here in Luke) they are joined by the word ‘Jerusalem’ which closes the warning and opens the lament.” (p. 173) The death which Herod threatens is the death which Jerusalem will provide!

But the warning itself is an odd thing. Some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, “Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you.” Some Pharisees said this.

Everyone knows that all good literature is driven by conflict. In Luke’s Gospel the protagonist is, of course, Jesus. His main antagonists are lumped together under the heading of “religious authorities.” They include Pharisees, scribes, chief priests, officers of the temple, elders, rulers, and Sadducees. As Jack Kingsbury puts it, “They are the stereotypical opponents of Jesus, those with whom he becomes locked in controversy and who see to it that he is put to death.” (*Conflict in Luke*, p.22) So why are some Pharisees warning Jesus that Herod wants to kill him?

Have you seen the movie *Up In The Air*? It stars George Clooney as a businessman who spends most of his life in airports and on airplanes. In one scene he and a colleague are trying to determine which security line to get in and Clooney says something like, “get in behind Asians—always Asians.” Then he explains, “They pack light, travel efficiently, and they have a thing for slip on shoes.”

His colleague is appalled at his comments and says, “That's racist.” Whereupon George responds, “I'm like my mother, I stereotype. It's faster.”

On the one hand, in Luke’s Gospel, religious authorities do take offense at Jesus. They charge him with blasphemy. They demand to know why the disciples violate custom and do not fast. They watch Jesus to see if he will heal on the Sabbath and become furious when he does. They impugn his integrity. They grumble when he befriends tax collectors and sinners and they ridicule his teaching. Eventually, their antagonism turns violent and they falsely charge Jesus before Pilate with being a revolutionary, call for the release of Barabbas, and clamor for him to be crucified.

But on the other hand, not all of the religious authorities do this. Some respectfully call him “teacher.” They come from all over Galilee to hear him preach and are astounded at his power. Jewish elders and Jairus, a ruler of a synagogue appeal to Jesus to heal a centurion’s slave. Pharisees solicit his opinions on the coming of God’s kingdom and on what one must do to inherit eternal life. Even in Jerusalem scribes express their approval at the way he confounded the Sadducees in debate. And some warn him of Herod’s intent to kill him. Stereotyping might be faster, but it is almost always inaccurate.

I suppose you noticed that Jesus ignored the warning and instead called Herod “that fox.” Why a fox? We Americans traditionally use the term “fox” to denote slyness or cunning. Brier Fox and all that! But in Jesus’ day the fox was considered not so much crafty as he was destructive. He despoiled vineyards; he plundered grapes. A constellation was known in ancient times as “the Fox and the Goose” and the goose was always pictured in the jaws of the fox. Some of the devastation implied by “fox” has carried over into the name for a common medical condition. The Greek for “fox” is “alopex.” Alopecia, loss of hair, literally means “fox mange.” Some contemporary translations avoid “fox” altogether and instead find the noun “jackel” more fitting. It wasn’t a good thing that Jesus called Herod. It wasn’t a backhanded complement about his political maneuvering, either.

Herod Antipas was a son of Herod the Great. He inherited the territories he governed when his father died. Early in his reign, Antipas married the daughter of King Aretas IV of Nabatea, a tiny kingdom southeast of Judea. But later Herod fell in love with his brother's widow, Herodias, who was herself a granddaughter of Herod the Great, and the two agreed to marry, after Herod Antipas had divorced his wife. John the Baptist took issue with all of this nonsense. Herod had him imprisoned and ultimately beheaded. Herod was bad news.

So much for the warning!

The lament begins the same way the warning ends: with “Jerusalem.” Kingsbury says that Luke is “replete with settings having special meanings.” (p. 5) Galilee is the place where Jesus begins his ministry. The “desert” is a place of renewal and isolation. The “mountain” is a place of security and prayer, and so forth. But the most important setting for Luke is Jerusalem, which is named 90 times in the Gospel while all the other New Testament books combined refer to it just 49 times.

Theologically, Jerusalem was thought to be the locus of God’s presence and activity on earth. It was where the Temple was, where God’s glory was revealed. The city of David, home of kings. Mount Zion itself. It was to Jerusalem that Jesus was determined to go. As we make our way through Lent, we journey with Jesus once again on his way to Jerusalem. And it was not a safe place for him to be. He knew that: O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you. How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under wings, but you were not willing!

On the western slope of the Mount of Olives, just across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem, sits a small chapel called Dominus Flevit. The name comes from Luke’s Gospel, which contains not one but two accounts of Jesus’ grief over the loss of Jerusalem. According to tradition, it was here that Jesus wept over the city that had refused his ministrations. Fritz Schilling and I were fortunate enough to visit this chapel a few years ago on a trip we took to Israel on behalf of the American-Israel Friendship League.

Inside this “teardrop” shaped chapel, the altar is centered before a high arched window that looks out over the city. Iron grillwork divides the view into sections, so that on a sunny day the effect is that of a stained-glass window.

On the front of the altar, is a mosaic medallion of a white hen with a golden halo around her head: it is on your bulletin cover. Her red comb resembles a crown, and her wings are spread wide to shelter the pale yellow chicks that crowd around her feet. There are seven of them, with black dots for eyes and orange dots for beaks. They look happy to be there. The hen looks ready to spit fire if anyone comes near her babies.

The medallion is rimmed with red words in Latin (hard to see on your bulletins). Translated into English these words read, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" This last phrase is set outside the circle, in a pool of red underneath the chicks' feet: *you were not willing*.

Barbara Brown Taylor has reflected thusly on this text: “If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus’ lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them.”

Why a hen? Given the number of animals Jesus could have chosen to define himself and describe his mission, doesn't it seem strange that Jesus chose a mother hen? Many images in literature draw upon symbols of power to describe Jesus. T.S. Elliott spoke in one of his poems about Christ, the tiger. C.S. Lewis' in the Narnia series refers to Christ as a mighty lion. And then there is the eagle of Exodus and the leopard of Hosea? But a chicken? A hen? How much confidence is inspired by that?

But when you think about it, it is not so surprising for someone who rode into Jerusalem not on a white stallion with a call to arms, but on the back of a donkey with a cry for, “Peace”; who told his disciples to turn the other cheek; to pray for those who spitefully use you; to love your enemies; and who said “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”

The path Jesus journeyed into Jerusalem wasn't to be the king of the jungle, but a mother hen who fights for the weak and vulnerable and voiceless, who uses his power for good not harm. Also, there's this: a mother hen might be willing to defend her chicks against animals 100 times her size – ever seen a hen chase a cow? – but a mother hen has no fangs, no claws. Against a fox or jackel or someone like Herod she is vulnerable, defending her chicks with wings spread and chest exposed... not unlike the answer to all the violence Christ gave all sprawled out, arms wide open and chest exposed on a cross. (see sermon entitled “The Fox and the Hen” Charles Lewis preached on March 4, 2007 at Snohomish Presbyterian Church, Snohomish, Washington)

