

“Facing Our Foxes and Pharisees”

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Psalm 27

Luke 13:31-35

Last week I came across an article about a hungry fox that entered a chicken pen. From Aesop the Greek, who wrote fables that included foxes 500 years before Jesus was born, to stories from The Americas, Asia and Africa, the fox as a character in literature is someone who is almost always a trickster who outsmarts its opponent. In English language, to say someone has outfoxed you means they have prevailed against you in sneaky, crafty and intelligent ways.

So, we expect to know how the story ends when a fox slips into a chicken pen. But for this hungry but unfortunate fox in northwestern France, his story did not end as tradition expects. Instead, the 6,000 hens in the chicken pen gathered around this fierce beast, each one pecking away at him. It was Thursday, and they weren't ready to be dinner-- or to let any of their feathered friends be sacrificed for the greedy fox. The head farmer found the fox lifeless; he had been backed into a corner by the angry, pecking hens.¹

I admire how powerful a group can become when its individual members stop worrying about how to protect themselves as individuals and think instead how they can support one another in response to an enemy. How cool if Jesus, and his band of underdog followers-- disciples, the formerly blind and leprous, the woman who no longer hemorrhaged, the children whom Jesus welcomed, Lazarus's son who had been brought back to life, and Mary carrying her jar of precious ointment and Mary doing the dishes-- turned to face Herod, whom Jesus called “that fox”. Imagine if they had been able to cast upon Herod, and all of Jesus' enemies, the same fate that Jesus' enemies had in store for Jesus once he got into Jerusalem. What if Jesus did not have to die by execution because his followers were so unexpectedly clever at defeating his enemies?

Psalm 27 says, “When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh-- my adversaries and foes-- they shall stumble and fall” (27:2). However, Jesus does not receive this kind of protection from God.

¹Matthew Robinson, “Murder Most Fowl as Chickens Peck Fox to Death” on cnn.com, March 13, 2019

But there was no uprising. Jesus did die. And instead, Jesus offers a different kind of image. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing” (Luke 13:34).

Like any mother worried about her child, Jesus does not give up on Jerusalem, even when he knows going there will send him right into the fox’s den.

Jesus’ conversational partners in this passage, the Pharisees, were typically depicted in the gospels as antagonists-- meaning people who wanted to challenge, trap, or even silence Jesus. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees,” Jesus would often scold them, especially for their hypocrisy. And yet, repeatedly in the gospels the Pharisees show up alongside Jesus as conversational partners, dinner guests, and members of the crowd to whom Jesus preaches. For as much as they were scolded by Jesus, they were clearly in close relationship with Jesus. Well versed in theology, they were often interested in debates, and Jesus always took the bait. It reminds me of my cousin Bill, who got into a Facebook debate with me over the weekend when he trolled one of my posts. He and I each believe strongly about the role of the government in preventing gun violence... and we are polar opposites in what we believe. After several back-and-forths, neither of us had the other convinced. And so, we brought the conversation onto neutral territory by talking about sports, which is code for saying, “In the end, as much as we disagree, we are still family.” As today’s passage tells us, the Pharisees were close enough to Jesus to care to warn him: run and hide! “For Herod wants to kill you.” They were trying to bring Jesus to neutral territory.

But Jesus chooses not to be neutral. Here, the Pharisees expose Jesus’ biggest vulnerability, and it is one he shares with us: his mortality. But it is not a vulnerability Jesus hides from, even though it was real: Herod Antipas-- “that fox”, as Jesus calls him-- had killed John the Baptist and had his head served on a platter. Josephus, the Jewish Roman historian, wrote that Herod “feared that the great influence John had over the masses might put them into his power and enable him to raise a rebellion.”² Some wonder if Herod might have feared that Jesus was actually John back from the dead. Regardless, Jesus’ growing following represented an influence that was a threat to Herod’s power.

Barbara Brown Taylor, a preacher from my home state, talks about life in the rural north Georgia mountains where she lives. She raises chickens there, and a friend once gave

² Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.118

her an orphaned guinea chick. She chose a Silkie hen to be the foster mother for this lonely chick. Here's how she describes the introduction:

"First I lay on the grass while she and the baby watched each other through the mesh of the cage. Then I placed her inside. Both she and the baby froze. The baby cheeped. The hen did not move a feather. The baby cheeped again. The hen stayed right where she was. The baby took a few steps toward her. I held my breath. The gray hen lifted her wings. The baby scooted right into that open door. When I checked on them an hour later, all I could see was a little guinea chick head poking out from under that gray hen's wing."³ Taylor continues this adoption process anytime she finds herself with a chick that has no parent. It still makes her anxious, as she describes,

"Please, please, please, don't peck this baby, I plead. It's so little. It has never laid eyes on any momma but you. Then I set the chick in the cage with her, sitting down where I can watch what happens.

The baby cheeps. The hen does not move a feather. The baby cheeps again. The hen stays right where she is. The baby takes a few steps toward her. The hen lifts her wings. *Come to momma, honey.*"

Jesus' love is like that for us. No matter the risk, Jesus is willing to take us under his wing. No matter how alone or forgotten we may find ourselves, Jesus recognizes our need and tends to it. No matter if we do not match the kind of people Jesus came from, Jesus collects us as one of his own. No matter the dangers that lurk, Jesus is willing to go on that way today, tomorrow, and the next day.

When Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem, he was orienting his direction in the present for the vision he believed could be our tomorrow. If any of you want to follow in Jesus' footsteps, then **set your face today toward the vision you want, the vision God calls us to, for tomorrow.**

My heart was and still is heavy from the tragedy and evil that caused a white supremacist to take the lives of innocents while they were at prayer in their mosques in Christ Church, New Zealand on Friday. I want to relay to you that I have communicated with the President of Darul Islah, one of our neighboring mosques in Teaneck, to offer prayers and support on behalf of our church as they mourn an attack on Muslims. I want you to know that the mosque thanks us for our prayers and support, and invites any who are interested to an event of "Prayers for Peace and Healing" at 3:30 today.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Barnyard Behavior" in *The Christian Century*, Sept. 19, 2006

On the same day that the shooting took place, young people around the world were skipping school for the day to demonstrate against climate change. This movement was started by a 16 year old Swedish girl, Greta Thunberg. Several years ago, Greta-- who has Asperger's Syndrome-- became depressed over the state of the world. She stopped eating-- to the point that she also stopped growing. What pulled her out of this serious depression was using her voice for change. She began to share her concern over the problems of global warming: rising ocean waters, endangered and extinct animals and reefs; the impact consumption by the wealthy has on the world's poor in destroying their habitat... She called the selfish habits of the older generations, including mine, into accountability. "You only talk about moving forward with the same bad ideas that got us into this mess, even when the only sensible thing to do is pull the emergency brake. You are not mature enough to tell it like it is. Even that burden you leave to us children." So on Friday, from Seoul to Sweden, from Uganda to the United States, children and teenagers from 100 countries skipped school to draw attention to global warming.

These chicks are starting to poke their heads out from the mother hen's wings. Something has nurtured them to look for something more, something better than what they see around them. But what they want more is not more comfort at the expense of others. What they want more is not the easy availability of more gadgets and disposable things at the cost of the earth's welfare. What they want more of is more years of clean air. They want more hope that the children and grandchildren of this generation will not suffer because of our choices today. They want more tomorrows.

Jesus' journey to Jerusalem had a purpose rooted in that hope. It was not risking his life for the sake of suffering. He took this journey so that we would know the way when we are facing our own foxes and Pharisees, and know that we do not travel it alone. He took this journey so that we might have hope enough to invest in a future beyond today. He took this journey. Now, what journey are you willing to make today to bring forth God's vision for tomorrow?