

Under the Wings

Scriptures: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18, Luke 13:31-35

The Fox and the Little Red Hen

As a young boy I enjoyed staying the night at Grandma and Grandpa Berryman's house. Grandma would read me bedtime stories. It was fun to sit next to her on the couch and listen to her read. One story she read to me was called "The Fox and the Little Red Hen." How many of you are familiar with that story? In it, a sneaky old fox creeps up quietly behind the little red hen, grabs her, and puts her in his bag. Then he runs up the hill towards his house to have a chicken dinner. While in the bag, the little red hen remembers that she has a pair of scissors in her apron pocket, and when the fox stops halfway up the hill to rest, she cuts a hole in the bag, slips out, and puts a large rock in the bag and runs away. When the fox gets home, there's no chicken in his bag, just an old rock. The little red hen was too smart for the old fox!

The Gospel lesson we're going to look at today always reminds me of this children's book, because there's a fox in it, and a hen! They aren't talking animals, of course, but they are metaphors that Jesus uses to describe a couple specific people, one of them being Himself! So, if you have your Bible, or Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 13:31-35. I'll be reading from the New International Version. **Read Luke 13:31-35.**

This passage is interesting to me for a couple reasons. There are actually two different events which take place here, a conversation between the Pharisees and Jesus, and then Jesus' lament over Jerusalem. By this point in the historical record, Jesus was nearing the peak of His popularity. He's only days away from the fanfare of Palm Sunday's entry into Jerusalem. Pay close attention to the interaction between Jesus and who we usually perceive as His enemies – the Pharisees. "At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to Him, 'Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you,'" Luke records in verse 31.

Herod Wants to Kill You

Are they really concerned about Jesus' safety? A few prominent Pharisees eventually follow Jesus. Guys like Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus were actually members of the Sanhedrin which put Him on trial and handed Him over to Pontius Pilate. Paul, the writer of many New Testament Epistles, prior to his conversion, was a Pharisee. Maybe the Pharisees were genuinely concerned. Or, maybe they just wanted to get Jesus out of town and out of their hair, that is, assuming they had more hair than I do!

Let's talk for just a minute about Herod, because we hear that name, and probably have some familiarity with it. We've heard of Herod before, right? If you think of the Christmas story, and the Magi coming to see Jesus in Bethlehem, then you're close! That King Herod was this King Herod's dad. This Herod had some brothers, and the whole group of them are called the Herodian Dynasty. They were a royal family that

ruled over the Holy Land during the days of the Roman Empire. The whole lot of them were bad, and this one in particular, was especially wicked. His actual name was Herod Antipater, or Herod Antipas, and he was ruthless!

You know the story of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin. John the Baptist was put into jail by this Herod we're reading about today, because John the Baptist was critical of the immoral lifestyle Herod was living. Herod had divorced his wife, and got his brother's wife to divorce his brother, and then Herod married her. What a mess! See friends, Jerry Springer type stuff has been going on all through human existence – "There's nothing new under the sun," (Ecc. 1:9) the writer of Ecclesiastes tells us.

The Herodian Mess

It gets worse. Herod's wife, who used to be his sister-in-law, wasn't happy about John the Baptist being alive in prison. So, she got her daughter, Salome, to dance for her step-dad uncle's birthday party – it reminds me of an old song by Ray Stevens, "I'm My Own Grandpa." I'm telling you, you can't make this stuff up. When you start connecting the dots between people and events in the Bible, sometimes some of the stuff that happened is stranger than fiction!

Anyhow, the girl's dancing made Herod so happy that he offered her a gift of anything she wanted. You know the rest of the story – she asks for the head of John the Baptist. So Herod had John the Baptist killed. Secular history records that this particular Herod was such a cruel tyrant that he actually had two of his own sons executed because he viewed them as threats to his throne. He was bad! Later on, this same Herod would become involved in Jesus' trial and crucifixion. He helped have Jesus nailed to the cross. Herod was a very wicked king, from a family of wicked kings.

Notice how Jesus reacts – how He responds to their warning to leave where He's at. He says, "Go tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day – for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!" (Luke 13:32-33). Jesus isn't afraid of Herod's threats, of the Pharisees' warning – even though He knows what Herod did to His cousin, John the Baptist. He's brave! He's got a job to do, that's been given to Him from the Father, and He's not going to let Herod or anyone else stop Him from doing it. Aren't you glad we worship a Savior who "keeps on keepin' on," and gets the job done, Church?

Getting the Job Done

Some people may think it's funny to think of Jesus calling a king a "fox." He doesn't use the word the same way we do, when we refer to a person. When we use it, we may mean a person is physically attractive. When I was a kid, I'd hear guys talking about girls, and they'd say something like, "Oh, she's a fox," meaning they thought the girl was attractive. Another way we use it may mean the person is smart, in a negative sense. They're crafty, sneaky, or sly. Kind of like the fox in the children's book. The fox sneaks up on the hen and stashes her in his bag to take home for his dinner. But that's not how Jesus uses it though.

In that day and age, if you called someone a “fox,” you meant they were worthless. They were a nobody. Today we might call them “scum.” Have you ever heard someone say that of someone else before? That’s what the term “fox” is like here. Jesus is bold to say Herod’s a nobody! At what looked like the end of Jesus’ life – from a human perspective – when Pontius Pilate, Herod Antipas, the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, priests, and Sanhedrin – were holding trials against Jesus, they thought if they killed Jesus, they would win. They thought they would be more powerful.

Pilate thought he would be more powerful. Herod Antipas thought he would be more powerful. The Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, priests, and Sanhedrin thought they would be more powerful. What they didn’t know was that they were pitting themselves against Someone who is more than just a man! They were going up against the Son of God – God-in-flesh – and God showed everyone who really wins. He does! That’s the thing every follower of Jesus Christ today knows – what the world really needs to know. God wins! Jesus was brave – not only for standing up to kings, governors, political, and religious leaders, but most importantly, He stood up to death and whipped it when He rose from the tomb on Easter morning! God’s love is stronger even than death – and that’s something we can take to the proverbial bank!

Lament Over Jerusalem

The second event which takes place in this Scripture is Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem. Depending on what version you’re reading, the entire section may have a subtitle such as “Jesus Laments Over Jerusalem,” or “Jesus’ Sorrow for Jerusalem.” A lament is an expression of grief or sorrow. It shows that someone is mourning, usually the loss or death of someone near and dear to them. It’s a way to come to terms with the loss we experience.

We understand loss. Jesus understands loss. There’s an entire book in the Bible, the Book of Lamentations, in the Old Testament, written by Jeremiah the prophet, which examines the destruction of Jerusalem, the temple, and the exile of Judah to Babylon in beautiful, although bittersweet, poetic form. The other day we heard pieces of lament during Janet’s celebration of life. We hear pieces of that in each celebration of life – or as the *Book of Worship* and the *United Methodist Hymnal* call it – each Service of Death and Resurrection we observe, because there’s a shared sense of loss, of grief. We miss the saints we’ve known, who are now at home with the Lord.

Jesus laments Jerusalem, saying, “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 her wings, but you were not willing!” (Luke 14:34). It seems weird to think of Jesus – God – comparing Himself to a mother hen. It’s an interesting image to picture Him this way. There are several species of birds in which the female cares for the young. I read somewhere once that a mother hen – I’m assuming they were talking about chickens, and that’s what I’m picturing Jesus talking

about here – mother hens will sit on her nest of eggs for three weeks, keeping them warm until they hatch.

Under the Wings

She only leaves the nest to eat, drink, and well, you can imagine. After the chicks hatch, the mother hen keeps them close, under her wings, for another six weeks. She does this to keep the chicks safe and warm. She teaches the chicks how to scratch for food and other things they need to know to live on their own. The mother hen tries to protect her chicks from predators. We have some common predators around here – cats, raccoons, coyotes, hawks, foxes! Jesus uses the picture of a mother hen caring for her chicks in this passage to teach us about His love for us. The old fox couldn't defeat Jesus – neither could the devil or death – but like a mother hen gathering her chicks beneath her wings to protect them, Jesus willingly gave Himself to save His children – even though they rejected Him over and over again.

“Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see Me again until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord,’” (verse 35). The temple was destroyed by Rome in 70 AD. The people of Jerusalem welcomed Jesus into the city on Palm Sunday, amid waving palm branches, and shouts of “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” Yet within a week's time they would also shout, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” Jesus knew what was going to happen to Jerusalem, and to Himself. He knew He would soon go to the cross to pay the price for your sins and mine.

And how He loves us! He still loves His children today. He still wants to gather them up in His arms, protect them, and care for them. Have you ever thought of Jesus like that before? Jesus wants to protect you and me – and take care of you and me – even after all the sinning we've done, and continue to do. What a great honor and privilege we have to serve and know Jesus Christ. It is mind-boggling to think that the King of the Universe would spread His “wings” so to speak, to take note of us individually, to provide us with shelter in the shadow of what He was doing once for all time when His strong, holy arms stretched out and were pierced on the cross.

Even when we stray away from God and His Word, He still loves us. He still tries to woo us back into relationship with Himself through Christ. He relentlessly pursues us. And He keeps us in His firm grip until the time comes for us to join Him in the home He's made for us. He's truly an amazing, the One and only glorious God!
Prayer: Hope beyond all human hope, You promised descendants as numerous as the stars to old Abraham and barren Sarah. You promise light and salvation in the midst of darkness and despair, and promise redemption to a world that still will not listen. Gather us to Yourself in tenderness, open our hearts to Your Word, and teach us to live faithfully as people confident of the fulfillment of Your promises. We ask this in the strong name of Jesus Christ. Amen.