

Foxes, Eagles, and Hens

Deuteronomy 32:10-18; Luke 13:31-35

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Nobody likes to be called a chicken, a wimp, a weakling. So perhaps we can understand Jesus' strong reaction when the Pharisees come to him and offer a little friendly advice: Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you. Given many of the Pharisees' strong dislike for Jesus, it's hard to judge the sincerity of this statement. Earlier in Luke, we're told that they are looking for a way to destroy him. Are these guys different? Are they really concerned about Jesus? Of all four gospels, Luke presents the least negative pictures of the Pharisees. So is this friendly advice or just more bullying?

Luke says it was at that very hour when the Pharisees come to Jesus; that is, this warning comes right on the heels of Jesus' words about his kingdom, where the first will be last and the last, first. These prophetic words could not have fallen too lightly on the ears of the Pharisees or of Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, who had tried to kill Jesus as a child.

The "first" of a society are its most powerful players, and power players do not take kindly to having their power threatened. Rather, they tend to lord it over anyone they perceive as a threat. But Jesus is not playing their power game. He has other work to do, and his time is short, so he answers them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.'"

"Fox," that's dangerous language for Jesus to use. In the Hebrew scriptures, the fox was portrayed as destructive. Not only that, but the fox (or jackal) was an unclean animal. In Greek stories, the fox was considered clever and unpredictable. A fox is predatory, sneaking around in the dark, keeping everyone on edge and anxious. So when Jesus calls Herod a fox, news of this charge would only intensify Herod's desire to kill Jesus, and Jesus knows it. Jesus knows the fox is dangerous, and smart. The fox is clever in the ways of the world. His cunning and deception keep him well-fed, and his appetite shows no mercy to the weak. The fox has a lot of company in the Bible. He shares the stage with the lying serpents and the wolf that attacks the sheep, the lion that roams about to devour its prey, and the scorpions with a poisonous sting. As with his treacherous comrades, wherever the fox is, death and evil lurk nearby.¹

Our world teaches us to behave like a fox. We are soaked red in violence whenever we turn on the TV, be it the world news or a movie that bathes us in blood or a computer game that awards the highest score to the best killer. It seems natural when our boys want to play shoot-em-up, kick-em-up, blow-em-up games. After all, they're just being boys, right? Boys on their way to a manhood defined in the terms of the fox. And when our culture of violence is left unchecked, we end up with abusive fathers and mothers who teach their children exactly what they learned from their fathers and mothers. We get gangs who must prove their superiority, their acceptability, by their willingness to harm or even kill others. We get troubled boys whose solution to their angst is to unload assault weapons into the bodies of their schoolmates. You have to

wonder how many thousands of times these boys have already pulled the trigger, sitting in front of a blood-soaked computer screen. And we get soldiers who go to war with scripture verses printed on their gun sights to reassure them that they're doing the work of God.

So Jesus steps right into these gun sights when he challenges the Fox. He is bold, but he is not clueless. He understands his risk. He knows his days are numbered. Today, tomorrow, the next day, time is short. Yet he keeps on keeping on. He says he must keep on, as he has insisted from the beginning of his ministry. He must! This divine imperative is the driving beat of Luke's gospel. He must hold fast to his mission. He is accomplishing God's purposes, and nothing can be allowed to stand in the way of God's work of salvation, even if it means playing into the hands of Herod the Fox.

It's worse than that, really. It's worse than the Fox. Jesus knows that behind the Fox there is an Eagle, a Roman Eagle. By challenging Herod, Jesus is also challenging the Roman Empire by whom Herod's little dynasty is being propped up. It is a bold challenge. Jesus is certainly no chicken.

But he would like to be a chicken, or more specifically, a hen. In his relation to the people of the Holy City of Jerusalem, Jesus would like to be a mother hen. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," he laments, "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!" For all his confidence in his heavenly ordained mission, Jesus is deeply disappointed. He is on a journey to the sacred center of Israelite religion, the home of the Temple, the holy city of Jerusalem. He goes knowing that he is God's Son, Yahweh's Beloved, the Chosen One who comes in the name of the Lord, and that he should be welcomed and honored as such. But he knows that he will be rejected by the people he loves, by the people he longs to save, and that he will die like the prophets before him. Already he feels the sting of unrequited love, the agony of betrayal at the hands of those who should exalt him. How easy it would be to let his pain turn to rage, to lash out, fox-like against his enemies. Who would blame him if he did that?

Jesus' heart is not hardened by his pain; rather, it is melted, like the heart of a mother for her children. Jesus wants more than anything for the people of Jerusalem to scurry back to God, to be gathered under the protection of God's wing. We find this image in other prophets, too, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, and in the prayer of Moses we have read in Deuteronomy:

God sustained Jacob in a desert land...
he shielded him, cared for him, guarded him....
As an eagle stirs up its nest,
and hovers over its young;
as it spreads its wings, takes them up,
and bears them aloft on its pinions....

Fans of *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings* will remember that it is always the majestic eagles who swoop down and save the day at the very last moment when the heroes of Middle Earth are in their direst jeopardy. If only Jesus had likened himself to an eagle! But Jesus wants to be a mother hen. In our world that worships the cunning power of the Fox, the brutal power of the Eagle, how strange, how unappealing, how

laughable is Jesus' picture of himself as a hen, a Mother Hen, gathering her brood. What good is that against the teeth of the Fox?

The picture on the front of the bulletin is of a mosaic on the altar of a chapel in Israel, the church of Dominus Flevit (The Weeping God). Supposedly, the church stands in the very place where Jesus wept for the city. On the front of the altar is an image of a hen with a flock of chicks under her wings. But to my eyes, this bird looks more like a rooster than a hen. Someone even suggested a resemblance to a gamecock! In fact, if you remember pictures you've seen of the Roman Eagle, sitting atop a Roman flag or staff, this hen, or rooster, is striking a remarkably similar pose. A rooster, like an eagle, can at least defend himself. However, Jesus did not liken himself to a rooster, but to a hen, whose response to a predator is not dominance, but defense of her brood. She will do everything she can to shelter her chicks. One preacher has suggested that "at the very least, [the hen] can hope that she satisfies [the fox's] appetite so that he leaves her babies alone."²

But Jesus laments because this gathering, this picture, never happened. Jesus would have gathered the people of Jerusalem, but they were not willing; they did not desire it. In this mosaic are those damning words, "You were not willing to stand out in a pool of red at the feet of the chicks." Three times in this passage we hear of competing desires: Herod desires to kill Jesus, Jesus desires to gather the people for their protection, but the people do not desire to be gathered. Same word, three competing desires. The people desire to have the protection of the Fox and the Eagle, so they turn away from the desire of God to gather them, and as a result, God leaves them to their desires. "See, your house is left to you."

We cannot, of course, listen to this lament and think it is only about Jerusalem and the Jews in their rejection of Jesus. For the church has too often left the love of Christ unrequited, enticed away by our love for power and dominance and worldly victory. Ever since the Roman Emperor Constantine painted the Cross of Christ on the shields of his warriors and said, "In this sign, Conquer!" Christ the Hen has been morphed into Christ the Eagle. How tempting it is to love the power of the Eagle and the success of the Fox more than the weakness of Christ the Hen.

And yet, in the deep mystery of the gospel, the desperate love of the Hen turns out to be victorious over the cocky brutality of the Eagle and the cunning profitability of the Fox. Jesus is going to die, and he knows it, but he is also going to win, and he knows it. God's purposes will be fulfilled. God's salvation will be accomplished, not by Jesus giving in and adopting the methods of the Fox, but by standing firm and letting himself be killed by the Fox only to come back stronger than the Fox ever hoped to be! Barbara Brown Taylor has written, "She died a mother hen, and afterwards she came back to them with teeth marks on her body to make sure they got the point: that the power of the fox could not kill her love for them, nor could it steal them away from her."

So maybe it's not so bad to be called a chicken after all if that means belonging to the brood, gathered under the protective, nurturing wing of Christ. The Church is the brood of chicks that huddles together under the wing of the Hen; here we find shelter and safe haven, but not only that! Here under the wing of Christ, we learn to act like Christ; we learn the way of the Mother Hen. Here we find the courage to stand firm against the Foxes and their violent ways. Here we learn to protect our own children from the images and experiences of violence that would saturate their

world in games, on TV, in the movies, on the playing field, or on the court, images and experiences that plant the seeds of later adult trust in violence. We gather them and gather them again and again in a desperate struggle to protect them and ourselves from the Fox and his ways.

Here, in the brood, we learn to trust in the vulnerability of love and tenderness. We learn to care for those who need our care, even if it wears us out until we're dead tired, even if it puts us at risk ourselves, our schedules at risk, our savings at risk, our status at risk, even our lives at risk. Here, huddled together in the shelter of her wing, we learn to look up at Christ, our Mother Hen, brooding over us, vulnerable for our sake, dying for us. And in her we behold the glory of God, and we cry, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord."

Notes

1 R. Alan Culpepper, "Luke" in *New Interpreters Bible, Volume IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 282.

2 Barbara Brown Taylor, "Chickens and Foxes," *Bread of Angels* (Boston, MA, 1997): 124, quoted in *Lectionary Homiletics*, March 2001, 12.