

Sermon: The Fox is Guarding the Hen House?

Year C, Lent 2

[Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35](#)

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How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, (Luke 13:34) Warm in those soft feathers, something bigger than us, watching out, noticing a danger, a hawk, maybe, or a stray, unfamiliar dog. The warning cluck that we were born wired to respond to, and we run under those big strong wings, warm and soft and safe. Because the hen is doing what she is supposed to do and we chicks are doing what we are supposed to do.

We want protection, we want to feel safe. As we move from chick to hen, we still want protection, but we also want our chicks to feel safe. And as we move from spring chicken to winter hen, we want our parents to feel protected too. Now we may change our minds about how to provide that protection for all the folks around us. Sometimes having more money seems like a good way to keep the scary things at bay. Sometimes we want to step in and tell the doctor that they have to listen to our mother's long winded tale because we're sure there's something there. Sometimes we make our kid stand up for himself and sometimes we step in and work with him to manage his temper better. But that longing, that desire to feel safe and to provide protection, is there in all of us.

One of the ways we protect our children and our parents is that we teach them about the real world. We want them to live in a safe and happy world, where they do right by the people they meet every day and assume that the people they meet will do right by them. But we also teach them not to get into cars with strangers. We leave notes by their telephones that the IRS is not going to call if there's a problem with their taxes (the IRS always starts an interaction with a tax payer via a letter). One of the ways that we protect them is to keep our eyes and ears open for the tricks and scams and cons that the world likes to run on innocent people.

For some people Jesus seems so focused on the coming Kingdom of God that he doesn't really see the trainwreck of this world. People promise cures to cancer that will only cost all of the family's remaining savings and we're supposed to turn the other cheek? Kids are poisoned with lead in their drinking water, the world heats up because it's too expensive to even explore how to keep that from happening, a government unleashes violence against its own people, causing thousands of them to flee their homes, and we're supposed to love our neighbors as ourselves. You can see why people are skeptical about following Jesus. The kingdom part may sound great, bring it on and deliver justice like a mighty stream. But the day to day living in this world ... Jesus just doesn't seem tough enough. And not just to people who aren't Christians. I think we all have days when following a man tortured to death on a cross, abandoned by the people who loved him, seems pretty ineffective.

Part of that is my fault, or the fault of other preachers like me. We don't always point out the tough, infinitely practical, totally tuned into this world guy that appears in Scripture. So let's look at him here. Because once you see him, you can't un-see him. And you'll start catching glimpses of him not only in other Scripture passages, but in the grocery store parking lot and at political rallies and in banking regulation hearings.

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to [Jesus], “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” (Luke 13:31). Some Pharisees? Some *Pharisees*? The Pharisees wanted everyone from the bottom of society to the top to obey the religious law in the very traditional interpretation that they, the Pharisees, laid down. The Pharisees had a real problem with Jesus of Nazareth, because he was calling for a new and radical interpretation of the Law. Plus, as far as they were concerned, he broke the Law and healed people on the Sabbath and ate with people who should be kept outside decent society. And he taught that the God of Israel cared for all the world’s people, not just the Israelites who met the Pharisee’s standards.

The Pharisees aren’t warning him. They’re threatening him. They had the local population more or less under control, the Romans were getting enough taxes that they were willing to leave Herod Antipas in charge of that province, and no one in the elite power structure wanted Jesus’ kind of trouble. Because his kind of trouble was the worst kind of trouble. He cast out demons and healed people. Jesus taught people to fall back on the old ways, just like the Pharisees claimed they wanted people to do. But Jesus was teaching them to fall back on the way of the village, of people looking out for one another, of taking care of one another, of standing together against unjust oppression. If a tiny, privileged minority is controlling a vast and deprived majority, the last thing they want is for that majority to realize how much strength and resilience they had if they worked together. Jesus was teaching the oppressed that they were worth saving, they were worth healing, that they could support each other and didn’t need the minority’s control.

So they threaten him. Why doesn’t he take his little travelling medicine show off to Jerusalem where he would be the Roman’s problem¹ and leave them their system that suited them fine, even if it drove thousands of others to destitution and ultimately death.

Jesus hears the threat and says, “*Go 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.’*” (Luke 13:32) And what you hear in “fox” is what it meant back then. Foxes weren’t clever, they were sleazy, corrupt, sneaking thieves that stole from honest people. We might call someone a “weasel” today and that would be close, but it’s not insulting enough. And when Jesus says “today” and “tomorrow”, he means what we mean when we say “today” and “tomorrow”. When he says “on the third day” he doesn’t necessarily mean “the day after tomorrow.” “The third day” could mean “the day after tomorrow” but it could also mean “a definite point in the future whose date we don’t yet know.”²

Jesus looks at the men who threaten him ... it was “Pharisees” remember, plural, best way to intimidate an individual is to send a gang ... Jesus looks at the men who threaten him and says basically, “Tell your boss that he knows where I am and he knows what I’m doing. And when I’m done my work here, whenever that is, I will move on. I will walk into the city that will kill me if that is where my Calling leads me. Because I am following the direction of a boss way bigger than that fox you follow.”

¹ Leslie Hoppe, “Second Sunday in Lent, Exegetical Perspective, Luke 13:31-35” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 71.

² John M. Perry, “The Three Days in the Synoptic Passion Predictions,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Oct 1986): 639.

That's tough. That's the response of someone who lives in the violence and the brutality of the real world where life doesn't count for very much, where power and wealth are acquired by rigging a system so it runs in your favor and grinds most people into their graves.

Turning the other cheek and loving your neighbor are tough. Sure they're hard to do, but if the system is breaking people, stealing from them their self-worth, their health, taking away justice and the ability to live in right relationship with God, God's creation and each other, then the system has to be broken. You don't break a bad system with vague promises of a change on some third day no one believes is ever going to come. You don't break a bad system with violence. You break a bad system with lots of people getting together and pooling their skills and their resources. You break a bad system by getting people together on a Sunday morning and having them promise the parents and the godparents of a one year old and a three year old that those adults are not the only ones who are going to look out for those kids.

Jesus' path is a tough one, make no mistake about it. We all long for the soft, warm feathers of protection. Jesus longs for us to be close to him, because that's where we'll be safer. But if we don't come together, we're going to get picked off one by one. The foxes are counting on it. In following Jesus, we're supposed to look out into the real world and see the real threats. By opening his wings wide, he's encouraging us to ask, "who else can I join with to face this threat?" Because the foxes long to be put in charge of the hen house. Jesus is tough enough to stand up to them with us.