

Sermon: Go and Tell That Fox for Me

Year C, Second Sunday in Lent

[Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35; Luke 9:28-36, \(37-43\)](#)

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At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." (Luke 13:31). That's the Pharisees speaking. So it's not a warning. It's a threat. It's never good when Herod is looking for you. Ask John the Baptist. Herod has an army to do his bidding. Not a figurative army. A literal, swords and shields, cavalry, artillery, infantry army who will do anything Herod says is necessary for keeping the peace. And Herod is looking for Jesus. And the Pharisees can't wait to be the ones to tell him.

And Jesus said to 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.'"* (Luke 13:32) We tend to cultivate this image of Jesus as a gentle peace maker, a non-violent protestor in the face of the injustices of 1st century Palestine. When you teach little kids in Sunday School, the Easter story is tough. Forget about the resurrection. For entire year you teach what a nice man Jesus was, how loving and caring, and then you teach that someone, a whole group of someones, wanted to kill him. For many kids, you don't even get to the mystery of the Resurrection. For them the mystery of Easter is why anyone would want to hurt such a nice man.

That may be why I love this story so much. We see Jesus being really tough. We catch a glimpse of how Herod & Co. would see him as dangerous. Jesus says to the Pharisees, and through them to Herod, who has been looking to kill him since he was born, "I am working here. I am doing what God has called me to do. And when I am done, I will leave. But I will *not* be interrupted."

I know I am supposed to walk in the Way of Jesus Christ. But I am not sure I could face down a threat like that. Perhaps I'd be angry, probably at myself, but I'm pretty sure I'd cave. Especially if I didn't have time to think, didn't have time to get myself ready to face the threat. And if they threatened my family instead of me? I'd do whatever they asked. Or suggested. Or vaguely implied they might be interested in having me do. That's not entirely true. I've certainly been in the hospital with folks and when they were getting the brush off from medical staff, I've been gracious as anything, but made it perfectly clear that I wasn't leaving until the patient's need had been attended to. But it's mostly true. I certainly wouldn't call Herod a fox.

There are so many people whom I admire. Mother Theresa. Archbishop Desmond Tutu. At book group last week, we were talking about the two scientists we were reading about and how they stood up to Hitler. I mentioned [Dietrich Bonhoeffer](#). He was a Lutheran minister, a scholar, from a famous and politically connected family in Germany. He got a teaching post at Union Theological School in New York, where his family hoped he would be safe. War was declared and he got on one of the last boats leaving Manhattan for Germany. He felt that you couldn't be part of putting Germany back together after the war, if you hadn't been in Germany during the war. He struggled against the Nazis, up to and including participating in a plot to assassinate Hitler. He was imprisoned, but his family was so important, no one dared kill him. He was one of the last people executed by the regime in 1945, only a couple of weeks before the concentration camp he was in was liberated by the Allies.

I can admire Mother Theresa, Archbishop Tutu, Rev. Dr. Bonhoeffer. I can think of them as great examples of Christian faith in action. Sure, maybe I can't be like Jesus Christ, but they're human, they live out their faith in my world, not 2,000 years ago. Except, when I am honest, I don't think I could be like them either. It might make my life easier to pretend I could. But the problem with having such exceptional people as my model of Christian faith in this world is that I am not that exceptional. I will give myself a pass when I don't live up to their standards. That lets me live out a life where Christian faith in action is only undertaken by heroes. Or superheroes. And my faith will become intellectual. Or simply fade.¹

In the reading from Philippians, we see Paul writing to his beloved little gem of a church. The church at Philippi was his favorite, even though he wasn't supposed to have favorites. They weren't perfect. He had to keep writing letters to them to help keep stuff straightened out. But they never gave him one tenth the grief that the other churches did. He writes to them and says, *Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me* (Philippians 3:17). Oh, man, don't do that. Don't do what I do, do what I say. And even then, I'm not sure you should do what I say either.

Let's be honest, Paul did not lack for confidence. He takes on Peter, Jesus' brothers and the rest of the Jerusalem crowd on how they should interpret Jesus' teachings. And Paul never met Jesus before the Resurrection; they had. Paul goes off and founds all these churches. He never gets one up and running smoothly before he's off to start the next one. The letter to the Philippians is written from jail because he's managed to aggravate someone important enough that they lock him up.

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me (Philippians 3:17). O.K., Paul. I'll get right on that.

Except that Paul, for all his failings, and the list was long, never, ever claimed to be anything other than a work in progress.² Paul knows about *the enemies of the cross of Christ* (Philippians 3:18) because he was one of them. He talks about the people whose *end is destruction* (Philippians 3:19), whose *minds are set on earthly things* (Philippians 3:19). No matter how perfect they become in this world, all that perfection is going to be laid in a damp, cold grave. Perfection in this world perishes in this world.³

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me (Philippians 3:17) is Paul saying, "I'm one of you guys. You know me. I'm not perfect. But doing my flat level best *to stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved*. (Philippians 4:1)." *Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us*. (Philippians 3:17) is Paul saying, "The way to live as a follower of Jesus Christ is what you see the other *citizens of heaven* (Philippians 3:20) doing as they struggle with how to live in this world and yet be subject to Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:21).

Like when Charlotte Farwell was dying and wanted a lobster roll in the middle of winter. You bought a live lobster, cooked it, shelled it, used real mayonnaise and brought it by her house. So

¹ Dirk G. Lange, "Second Sunday in Lent, Homiletical Perspective, Philippians 3:17-4:1" 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], 65.

² Robert R. Wicks, "The Epistle to the Philippians: Exegesis," vol. 11 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), 93.

³ Albertus Frederik Johannes Klijn, "Paul's opponents in Philippians 3." *Novum Testamentum* 7, no. 4 [1965]: 284.

she could have a really good lobster roll. How much more of an example do we need to understand love your neighbor?

Like when you got curious about a plaque that was built into the Brookline chapel. It quoted a psalm on it but the psalm wasn't in your Bible and you wondered what was up. It turns out that it was in your Bible, but the Catholics number their psalms based on a Greek translation and the Protestants number their psalms based on a Hebrew translation, even though both end up with 150 psalms. How much more of an example do we need to understand about revelation through study of Scripture than when we realize someone we worship with reads the buildings around us?

Like when you're on a long term business trip and you're in the grocery picking up stuff for the efficiency apartment you've been stashed in. And the lady ahead of you in line has spotted the sale on canned corn and is buying three cases of it to share with some folks from church. Except she miscalculated the cost, and she was going to put some back. So you buy all the corn for her and carry it out to her car. How much more of an example do we need to understand *for I was hungry and you gave me food* (Matthew 25:35)?

All these people worship in this room, week after week. And I could tell so many more stories of Christians you have coffee with week after week, Christians who struggle to live in this world and yet be subject to Jesus Christ. None of them, none of us, would say we had it figured out. None of us would say that anyone should set us up as a model, as something to be imitated.

It's just that when we come into community together, we can see how Jesus *transforms the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself*. (Philippians 3:21). We don't transform the body of our humiliation. We don't conform this world to the body of God's glory. We don't have the power. But Jesus does. Jesus does and Jesus uses some pretty imperfect and flawed human beings to do it. And when we care about making a lobster roll particularly yummy for a dying woman, when we care about how Scripture is built into our lives, when we are committed to get canned corn at a good price to go as far as it can, then we *are* standing firm in the Lord, my beloveds.

When we talk about stewardship, we think about the money we need to pull together to replace the windows (last week's service made that clear). We think about making sure that Outreach has what they need and that if we need more microphones because we have so many singers in New Beginnings, that we can get them. But we also need to do the kind of stewardship that lifts up the moments when one of us has stood firm in the Lord. Not because any of us is so fabulous. But because this world is so bloody tough to get through without setting our minds exclusively on earthly things. (Philippians 3:19)

We need to steward those moments because when we hear of them, we feel like we have been *gathered together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings* (Luke 13:34). We are Jesus' children, gathered safely together, in warm, feathery comfort, protected from the foxes of the world. So, yeah, *Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am making lobster rolls and checking out how my brothers and sisters number their psalms and getting a good deal on canned corn today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work*. And I'm doing this because I'm a citizen of heaven, even if I am a work in progress as a citizen of Brookline. I'm a citizen of heaven *and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ*. (Philippians 3:20). And if

today is not the day when I am doing my best work, one of my brother and sisters is doing an awesome job standing firm for the Lord.⁴

Yeah, you know what, *Go and tell that fox for me, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'* (Luke 13:35).

⁴ Lange, 67.