

“The Fox and the Hen”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
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First Scripture Reading: Psalm 36:1-7 (The Message)

¹⁻⁴ The God-rebel tunes-in to sedition — all ears, eager to sin. He has no regard for God, he stands insolent before him. He has smooth-talked himself into believing that his evil will never be noticed. Words gutter from his mouth, dishwater dirty. Can't remember when he did anything decent. Every time he goes to bed, he fathers another evil plot. When he's loose on the streets, nobody's safe. He plays with fire and doesn't care who gets burned.

⁵⁻⁶ God's love is meteoric, his loyalty astronomic, his purpose titanic, his verdicts oceanic. Yet in his largeness nothing gets lost; not a man, not a mouse, slips through the cracks.

⁷⁻⁹ How exquisite your love, O God! How eager we are to run under your wings, to eat our fill at the banquet you spread as you fill our tankards with Eden spring water. You're a fountain of cascading light, and you open our eyes to light.

Second Scripture Reading: Luke 13: 31-35 (NRSV)

³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³²He 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. ³³Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ ³⁴Jerusalem, Jerusalem, 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! ³⁵See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”



Sermon: “The Fox and the Hen”

Mahandas Gandhi, led the Salt March in protest of the British Empire's unfair taxation of a necessary commodity in 1930.¹

Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger in 1955.²

Crystal Lee Sutton led a campaign for better wages and working conditions in 1973.³

A man who has come to be known as “The Unknown Rebel” stood in front of an entire column of armored tanks, stopping them, as they approached Tiananmen Square in 1989.⁴

Colin Kaepernick refused to stand for the national anthem in 2016.⁵

What did all of these people do? They defied authority. They each made a conscious decision to do what they believed was right, and refused to back down from it, even in the face of threats and retribution.

We know Jesus as the Prince of Peace. He is the smiling face we grew up with on our Sunday school classroom walls; the kindly friend who listens to our bedtime prayers. We associate him with love and with all the things Paul says that love is, patience, kindness, truth-telling, etc.⁶ He welcomed children and the outcast and forgave sinners. But Jesus wasn't all rainbows and sunshine. He had a defiant streak in him, too. We see that defiant streak exhibited in this story from Luke's gospel.

A group of Pharisees come to warn Jesus that Herod is planning to kill him. Their warning appears meant to inspire Jesus to flee. But not only does Jesus refuse to run away, he actually has a message for the Roman Tetrarch.

He calls Herod a “fox” which is “a metaphor that paints Herod as sly, cunning, and voraciously destructive.”⁷

“Go and tell that fox for me,” Jesus says, “ ‘...I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.’ ” When I read this, I hear it in the bold voice of an action hero. It reminds me a little bit of Roddy Piper's line in that campy 1988 Sci-Fi film *They Live*: “I came here to kick [butt], and chew bubblegum. And I'm all outta' bubblegum.”⁸

Basically, Jesus is saying: “Hey, thanks for the warning guys. But I'm sticking to the plan: I'm going to finish my business here and then move along to Jerusalem. And neither Herod nor anyone else is going to change that.”

Defiance. No matter what Herod says or does, Jesus will continue his journey and his work. And why is that? Because this is the path to which God has called him. Jesus is not doing his own will, he is doing the will of God and he will not be deterred by the petty threats of the tyrant Herod.

This is not some false bravado or crazy bravery. It is Jesus living the words of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy will be done." Jesus will complete his work. He will arrive in Jerusalem as planned. He will preach and teach and then celebrate the Passover according to God's plan. And he will face whatever evil awaits him in Jerusalem. He knows that whatever is about to happen, will happen in Jerusalem - and not here. Such is his faith and trust in God, that he fears nothing that Herod can do to him. His defiance grows not from phony bravado, but from his unwavering faith and trust in God.

Even though he knows what awaits him in Jerusalem, he knows that it shouldn't be that way. He will be a victim of the sinful heart of Israel, but he longs for its redemption. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," he says, "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!"

The image of the mother hen is a caring and nurturing one. It suggests Jesus' concern for the people is born out of compassion and genuine concern for their well-being. The mother hen gathers her chicks together under her wings to protect them from harm.

What is it that Jesus wants to protect them from? The fox. Or more accurately, the way of life that the fox represents. As a mother hen would gather her flock to protect them from a fox, so Jesus wishes to gather the children of Israel to himself to protect them from the influence of Herod and people of his ilk.

Herod, or more accurately, Herod Antipas (the son of the "Herod" to whom Luke introduces us around the time of Jesus' birth) would have been well-known to Jesus. He was the Roman governor of that part of Judea. He had John the Baptist murdered when John criticized his marriage to his half-brother's ex-wife, a marriage John considered a violation of Jewish Law.⁹

Herod's way was very different from the way Jesus taught. Herod represents power and control, Jesus teaches a way that depends on allowing God to be in control. Where Herod lives a life of luxury, Jesus encourages those who would be his disciples to forgo the wealth and accumulation of stuff and instead store up for themselves treasure in heaven. Where Herod represents the military power of Rome, Jesus teaches his disciples that those who live by the sword, die by the sword.

The contrast here is stark. It is a staggering indictment of the people; that when given the choice between living as God intended, or giving-in to the temptations to be like Herod, the people of Jerusalem have too often chosen Herod. In this season of Lent, it is worthwhile to ask ourselves: Do I choose to follow Jesus or do I choose to follow Herod?

In the context of that choice, two stories from just this past week deserve comment.

The first was the scandal in which it was revealed that wealthy and powerful people used money and influence to buy their children into prestigious colleges by faking test scores and bribing athletic coaches to list them as recruits in sports those students didn't even play.¹⁰

There's an old saying in sports "If you ain't cheatin', you ain't tryin'." There's a lot of debate over who said it first, but you won't lose money betting on who lives by it. Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Montana was one of the more recent ones to say it. He was asked if part of the New England Patriots success could be attributed to their "skirting the rules" and he admitted that his own 49er teams had done the same; "But," he said, "If you ain't cheatin', you ain't tryin'."¹¹

While the temptation is to laugh it off as just the way the game is played, that attitude of doing anything, even if it's unethical or illegal, just to succeed, is wrong. And when we do it or allow it to happen without criticism or complaint, then we are choosing Herod.

The second story from this week is the act of terrorism that took place in New Zealand where a man killed 50 people and injured 50 more,¹² according to his own manifesto, because they were Muslim.¹³ But as tragic and horrifying and disgusting as this was, it is an extreme expression of fear and hatred that is all too common in our own culture. Too many people espouse it. Too many politicians prosper from it. When we allow the fear and hatred of people we do not know and do not understand to become law, or public policy¹⁴ and then accept it without working to change it, then we have chosen to follow Herod.

The choice to follow Herod or Jesus is one we make every day. In countless ways - big and small.

I can almost hear Jesus words to us, “America, America... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

- When we ban immigrants and build walls to keep them out and call that “security,” we have chosen Herod.
- When we cut subsidies and financial aid to the poorest and the most vulnerable people among us and call that “prosperity,” we have chosen Herod.
- When we distort the truth and demonize those with whom we disagree and call that “just politics,” we have chosen Herod.
- When we ignore the need and the suffering around us, even as we celebrate our own comfort and well-being and call that “God’s will,” we have chosen to follow Herod.

And in a world where inequality, and prejudice, and fear are all too common, and where love isn’t common enough, we as Christians have good news to share, if we will share it. The gospel of Jesus Christ can heal the broken places in this world. The gospel of Jesus Christ can provide a roadmap to peace. The Gospel of Jesus Christ has something to say about the evil that has happened in houses of worship in places like Christ Church, and Quebec City,¹⁵ and Pittsburgh,¹⁶ and London,¹⁷ and Charleston.¹⁸ But we are often too busy to learn the breadth and depth of that Good News and too often, we’re afraid to share what we do know.

I know the word “evangelism” is scary. More often than not, we’d rather *not be associated with the word, “evangelism”* because we don’t want people to associate us with the people who shout from street corners and knock on doors. So, we keep that good news to ourselves. But we’ve worked so hard to preach the gospel with our actions and not use words for fear of offending others or embarrassing ourselves, that we’ve forgotten the beauty of those words and the power of our own experiences of God.

When we keep silent, when we hide the light of Jesus and call it “consideration,” or “dignity,” we have chosen Herod.

You see, nowhere does Jesus teach security as a primary goal. Nowhere does Jesus teach self-comfort and luxury as high ideals. Nowhere does Jesus teach ignoring the poor and the vulnerable and the immigrants so that we can continue unchallenged and unchanged lives. Nowhere does Jesus teach our own comfort and well-being as the highest ideal.

Jesus said blessed are the poor and the hungry and those who weep;¹⁹ blessed are the meek and the peacemakers and those who mourn.²⁰ And he also said woe to those who are rich and who are filled and who laugh for they have received their reward.²¹ That doesn’t mean Jesus hates rich people or people who have been fortunate enough to do well. But it does show where Jesus placed his priorities and it helps us to see how often we choose to follow Herod.

And that’s what Jesus was seeing in his own people and that’s what he was lamenting. “Oh Jerusalem... how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, *and you were not willing.*”

I know the conflict here. I understand the difficulties in trying to honor Christ while at the same time trying to provide for a family and to exist in a society that functions on profit and buying and selling. I know that selling all that we own would only make us more vulnerable and dependent on others. So, I understand that there are not always simple answers.

But I also know that as a nation, we tend to value things that are not consistent with what Jesus taught.

In this season of Lent, we are invited to examine ourselves and look closely at the places where we fail to live what Christ taught; the places where we have rejected our true selves and chosen to be something other than what we were created to be. We call those places sin and we are called to confess the sin in our lives and to change the way we live.

Jesus taught love of God and neighbor as the highest law.²² He taught that we are to love our enemies and pray for them.²³ Jesus taught that we are to care and provide for the most vulnerable among us: the orphan, the widow, and the alien.²⁴ Jesus taught non-violence.²⁵ Jesus healed the sick.²⁶ Jesus forgave sinners²⁷ - even those who crucified him.²⁸ Jesus taught reliance on God and total commitment to God’s Kingdom.²⁹

This is the path to which we are called. And it is a difficult one. But truly being a disciple all comes down to our choices: Herod, or Jesus? A hundred times a day, everyday: Herod or Jesus?

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

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- ⁵ Mather, Victor. "A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick vs. the N.F.L." N. Y. Times, 15 Feb. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/02/15/sports/nfl-colin-kaepernick-protests-timeline.html.
- ⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, NRSV
- ⁷ Culpepper, R. Alan *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume IX: The Gospel of Luke and The Gospel of John*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998. 281. Print.
- ⁸ Nelson, Ray, and John Carpenter. *They Live*. Performance by Roddy Piper, et al., Alive Films/Universal Pictures, 1988.
- ⁹ Bond, Helen K. "Herod, Family." *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2, Abingdon Press, 2007, p. 809.
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- ¹¹ Wilson, Ryan. "Joe Montana on Patriots: 'If You Ain't Cheating, You Ain't Trying'." *CBS Sports.com*, CBS Broadcasting, Inc., 16 Oct. 2015, 6:10 PM, www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/joe-montana-on-patriots-if-you-aint-cheating-you-aint-trying/.
- ¹² Nicole Chavez and Madeline Holcombe, CNN. "Death toll rises to 50 in New Zealand mosque shootings." CNN, 18 Mar. 2019, www.cnn.com/2019/03/16/asia/christchurch-new-zealand-mosque-shooting-latest/index.html.
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- ¹⁹ Luke 6:20-21, NRSV
- ²⁰ Matthew 5:3-12, NRSV
- ²¹ Luke 6:24-26, NRSV
- ²² Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-31, Luke 10:25-28, NRSV
- ²³ Matthew 5:43-48, Luke 6:27-36, NRSV
- ²⁴ Matthew 25:31-46, Luke 10:29-37, NRSV
- ²⁵ Matthew 5:9, 38-42, Matthew 26:51-52, Luke 22:49-53, NRSV
- ²⁶ Matthew 9:18-38, Mark 7:53-56, NRSV
- ²⁷ Luke 5:17-26, Luke 7:48-50, John 7:53-8:11, NRSV
- ²⁸ Luke 23:33-34, NRSV
- ²⁹ Luke 12:22-34, NRSV