

**First Presbyterian Church, Wausau**

**Rev. Rachel A. Wann**

**The Fox and the Hen – February 21, 2016**

On this Second Sunday of Lent our scripture passage from Luke's gospel beckons to us to join Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem. As we draw near to Jesus, we are joined on our journey by a few Pharisees. Huffing and puffing from their exertion to catch him, they rush up to Jesus with a dire message. According to them, Herod is out for blood. A son of Herod the Great, Herod Antipas was the tetrarch in the region of Galilee, a regional authority over the Jews, having only the power that Rome allowed him to possess. This same Herod was the one who had imprisoned John the Baptist and later relieved him of the burden of his head. Herod had previously shown some interest in knowing more about Jesus, having heard the rumors and tales flitting about the Galilean countryside. Apparently his curiosity had turned to malice and he wanted to see Jesus dead.

This was not a surprising turn of events. It is quite probable that Herod wanted to silence Jesus. Part of what kept Herod in power was his ability to keep the locals under control. A rabble rouser or a rebellious prophet would be quite a thorn in old Herod's side, attracting unwanted attention from Rome. And if the rumors he had heard were true, this Jesus could be troublesome.

What seems more surprising is the identity of these messengers. They're Pharisees. They did not hold a high ranking on the list of Jesus' favorite people. Were they really bringing to Jesus a valid message of a specific danger to his life, or were they simply trying to get him out the picture? You know, frighten him enough so that he might go away and quit stirring up the local people. We don't know. Luke doesn't tell us the motivation of these messengers. Is the threat a true one or just a ruse to scare Jesus into hiding?

Either way it really doesn't matter too much what their motivation was. Jesus is unconcerned about the warning. In fact, he has a special message for them to take back to Herod, to let him know exactly how unconcerned he really is. Jesus resolutely chose to follow the path that God placed before him, and he will allow nothing on earth to steer him off that path.

As tetrarch, Herod thought of himself as the big cheese in Galilee. Later on in his political career, when he sought the title of King, like his father Herod the Great, the Romans not only denied his request, but after some accusations were leveled against him, he was deported to Gaul. (from Harper Collins Bible Dictionary) Jesus didn't think too much of Herod and referred to him as a fox, probably alluding to the attributes of slyness and cunning. Jesus wasn't impressed by Herod and certainly wasn't concerned about what this clever fox might or might not do.

The timetable that Jesus followed was based upon God's plans not the plans of human rulers. Jesus wasn't even concerned about death, because in fact he was traveling toward his death. But, he reasoned, that death could only take place in Jerusalem, the city with the reputation for killing the

prophets. Jesus was aware that his time was short. But he was committed to carrying out God's work to its completion.

The work of God has always been about freeing people from bondage, both literal and figurative. Moses brought the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt during the Exodus. The prophets of Israel continually proclaimed a message of salvation, yet the people turned away from God, bound by their own self-serving interests. Here in this passage Jesus describes his work as that of freeing people from demon possession and illness. Casting out that which threatens to keep people enslaved to the evils of this world and powerless to attain wholeness. The bondage keeps people from experiencing the fullness of life and freedom that he offers. In his response to the Pharisees he emphasizes that this work is crucial, it is work that he must do, even with the threat of death looming on the horizon.

Ultimately Jesus came offering freedom from the bondage of sin, yet so many rejected him and continue to reject him. The foxes of this world are wily and deceitful and lure us away from the good news Jesus delivers, often preying on our fears and insecurities, claiming that power is the only solution. The people are easily deceived and easily scattered. And this brings us to the second part of our passage, the lament over Jerusalem.

Luke is quite a fan of Jerusalem, naming the city 90 times in the gospel. Almost twice the number of references in the rest of the New Testament. And Luke is especially fond of mentioning the Temple in Jerusalem. In an article in the Christian Century, preacher Barbara Brown Taylor had this to say, "It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Luke loves the place -- so rich in history and symbol, so dense with expectation and fear. Jerusalem is the dwelling place of God, the place where God's glory shall be revealed (Isa. 24:23). It is also the place where God is betrayed by those who hate the good and love what is evil (Mic. 3:2). Nothing that happens in Jerusalem is insignificant. When Jerusalem obeys God, the world spins peacefully on its axis. When Jerusalem ignores God, the whole planet wobbles." (Feb. 25, 1986, p. 201, quoted online)

And it is to Jerusalem that Jesus is heading, knowing that he will be rejected. So Jesus laments. Listen again to what he said, "Jerusalem, 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." This is the voice of God longing for God's people, seeking them out, offering so much love and mercy and grace. Yet because God is a God of love, these things cannot be forced upon anyone. The unconditional love that is offered, the extravagant grace that is freely given, the mercy that is bestowed upon all who would accept it -- it's all there. Yet people still resist. People still turn away, rejecting both God and the promises that God gives.

If you have ever loved someone so much, a child perhaps, a dear friend, a close family member -- and you have been witness to them turning in a direction that is sure to take a tragic end -- you want to shield them from harm, gather them into your protective embrace, keeping them safe from that which threatens to devour them. Yet in some situations, there is nothing you can do except to open

up your arms to them, in a position that is both safe yet vulnerable. Because when you open yourself up in that way, you expose yourself to possible rejection. You can't force them to turn from their destructive path. Jesus expresses the intense longing and love of God to the very people who turn away in rejection.

And it's not just those who never even gave him a chance. God's very own people, the nation of Israel, the city of Jerusalem, the Holy City, the City of God. God's children have turned away, have resisted God's love and grace, and have gone off on their own, vulnerable to the cunning foxes of this world. This lament in turn extends to us. Even those of us in the Body of Christ, in the church, have at various times in our lives rejected and resisted God's word to us. God laments over our own denial of God's love and our defiance toward following God's call in our lives. We claim to have Jesus as Lord of our lives, yet the world cleverly beckons to us. We scatter in all directions when faced with ridicule for our faith, denying we ever even knew him. Jesus longs to draw us home, into the safe embrace of a protective mother.

We may be surprised by the type of animal that Jesus chooses to make his analogy. Not a fierce and mighty eagle or a brave and powerful lion. Not even a sturdy old donkey. No, he picks a chicken. Not a rooster, but a hen. A hen with chicks. I don't know about you, but the image of a hen doesn't inspire a lot of confidence within me. Especially after that remark earlier about Herod being a fox. What happens when you let a hungry fox loose in the henhouse? No wonder so many of the people went astray. They expected a revolution. They wanted a show of power. They wanted to see Rome devoured. They certainly didn't want a chicken.

But knowing Jesus I am really not surprised by the image he chose. His gospel message has continually been a message of turning over what we think is logical and right by worldly standards. The last will be first, the servant will be the master. The powerful will fall and the weak will inherit the kingdom of God. Those who are nobodies will become somebodies, and the somebodies will lose their way. Jesus challenges our worldly expectations about how we think the kingdom of God should be. A messiah who dies on a cross? What is up with that?

So we really shouldn't be shocked by this image of a chicken. A female chicken, a hen, trying to protect her brood of chicks from harm. If a fox enters the henhouse, the only way that the hen can protect her young from being devoured is to sacrifice herself, to put herself in the middle, to stand in harm's way. That is the posture that Jesus adopts. Of a mother hen, spreading her wings wide and exposing her vulnerable breast to the sharp teeth of the predator. If the fox wants the chicks, it's going to have to kill her first.

And of course that's exactly what happens. The journey to Jerusalem ends with Jesus up on the cross, arms spread wide, vulnerable to the foxes that seek to devour him. Some of his brood have already deserted him, denying any relation to him, scattered by the threat of danger, others mill around the periphery, confused by the events that have taken place. And Jesus sadly looks on like a

mother hen, longing to bring her little ones safely into her protective care, but willing to make the ultimate sacrifice on their behalf.