

## **"Journey to Jerusalem" – March 17, 2019 – Luke 13:31-35**

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We are still early in the Season of Lent – the Second Sunday – but we have begun to walk with Jesus as he makes his way toward Jerusalem. He is resolute in his conviction, and he will let nothing keep him from making this journey. Not even a threat on his life.

And in today's lesson from Luke's gospel, that's exactly what happens. Jesus has been traveling through small villages and towns healing people and teaching parables, and after one such occurrence, some Pharisees come up to Jesus with a warning. The local ruler, Herod Antipas, the who had killed John the Baptist, had now set his sights on Jesus. As a regional leader, Herod knew he had to keep the Romans happy or he would lose his authority. To keep the Romans happy, Herod had to keep the local people in their place. John the Baptist had awakened the Jewish people with his announcements concerning the coming Messiah, so Herod had imprisoned him, then later had him beheaded. Coming so quickly on John's heels, Jesus also appeared to be a threat to the local peace. Fearful of losing his position of power should the people begin to revolt, Herod wanted to find Jesus and put an end to any possibility of an uprising or rebellion against Rome.

However, Jesus is surprisingly unconcerned about the warning. In fact, he gives the Pharisees a return message for them to take back to Herod, to let him know exactly how unconcerned he really is. Jesus was determined to follow the path that God placed before him, and he would not allow anything to get in his way. Not even a scheming politician who would ruthlessly cut anyone down who threatened his power.

The timetable that Jesus followed was based upon God's plans not the plans of human rulers. Jesus wasn't even concerned about death – in fact he was actually 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 understood that his message would have serious opposition from those in power, and he was completely 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 temptations 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 into this world offering freedom to all people from the bondage of sin. Jesus knew, that like Herod, 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.

In his gospel Luke mentions Jerusalem 90 times. This is nearly twice the number of references to the city in the remainder of the New Testament. 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 to them 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, it could be a child, a dear friend, a family member – and you have witnessed them about to make an absolutely horrible decision – you want to stop them from ruining their lives, you want to whisk them away from danger, you want keep them away from any harm. 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 cannot force someone to turn away 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 if we really think about it, we shouldn't be surprised by the image Jesus 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 do what ever it takes to give them life.