

Don't Fear the Foxes

As we move further into Lent, our Gospel reading takes us and Jesus another step down the road that leads to Calvary. Jesus and his disciples have arrived in Jerusalem. As is his custom, Jesus is out on the street healing everyone who comes to him. Two Pharisees arrive, presumably from the Temple. They tell Jesus that King Herod wants to kill him and urge him to flee while he can. It's not an empty warning. This is the same King Herod who beheaded Jesus's cousin, John the Baptist, for daring to criticize Herod's incestuous marriage. Just like his father, who ordered the murder of hundreds of infants in an attempt to kill Jesus in his cradle, Herod is a violent man who answers any perceived opposition to his authority with brutal force. And yet, Jesus seems remarkably untroubled by the Pharisees' words. Instead of heading for the hills, he replies, "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.'" It's hardly the terrified response that the Pharisees might have expected. Not only is Jesus unimpressed by the threat Herod poses, he insults the king by referring to him not as some powerful, noble creature like a lion, an eagle, or even a wolf, but as a small, sneaky fox. If word of what Jesus called him got back to Herod, that quick-tempered tyrant would have been even more determined to execute Jesus just as he executed John.

In our postmodern era, some of our leaders, corporate and political, are just as likely as Herod was to come down hard on whomever they choose to target. Murder by royal decree isn't common anymore, thanks be to God, but anyone who has labored under the thumb of a temperamental boss knows what it's like to walk on eggshells at work, never knowing when a minor mistake or a thoughtless remark might trigger the loss of a raise, a promotion, or even a job that supports an entire family. People who work under such perilous conditions have plenty

of reason for fear. And in a season where arrogant, self-described “strongmen” increasingly dominate governments around the globe, where traditions and norms are upended, long-standing friendships are strained or broken, respected institutions are dismantled, and compassionate promises of support and refuge are abruptly withdrawn, millions struggle to keep courage alive. Precipitous changes are frightening even for those who aren’t directly affected by them, and these days far too many of us have either been hurt by changes ourselves or know someone else who has been or could be. When our world is suddenly turned upside down, terrified surrender to the whims of tyrants can feel like the only rational response.

As Christians, however, we are blessed to have the example of our Savior to follow, and in today’s Gospel Jesus shows us just what to do when an unstable person with more earthly power than compassion or common sense threatens to do us harm. When the Pharisees warn him, Jesus doesn’t drop what he’s doing and run for his life. He doesn’t march over to the palace to confront Herod, either (though I, for one, would give a great deal to eavesdrop on that conversation). He keeps calm and carries on. Jesus has three days of work to do for the people and, by God’s grace, he’s going to do it. Period. He brushes off the Pharisees’ worries and then swiftly shifts focus, lamenting for Jerusalem. His sorrowful words probably prefigure his own crucifixion. But when he says, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing,” we might wonder on whose behalf he mourns. Perhaps Jesus is speaking for a moment not as his human self, but as the divine Son and eternal Word who has been with the Father from before the beginning of time. Or perhaps he is expressing his Father’s grief that, no matter how many times he reaches out to his fallen children, humankind stubbornly refuses to accept his love and protection. Pope Francis believes that Jesus’s lament and accompanying tears in this passage are not his own but, rather,

“the tears of a father who weeps; it was God the Father who wept here in the person of Jesus.” If Pope Francis is correct, this passage doesn’t only describe the Father’s sorrow, important as that is. It also tells us that Jesus prioritized his Father’s feelings even when his own safety was at risk. That, in turn, tells us what we should do when secular bullies seem to threaten us or someone we love. Like Jesus, we’re called not to flee, fight, fawn, or admit defeat. Instead, we’re asked to focus on the Father’s desires and keep doing what’s right. Period.

Luke doesn’t tell us whether Jesus thanked the Pharisees for telling him what Herod planned, but I sincerely hope somebody did. Knowing when and how he was going to die, Jesus might not have taken Herod’s threats too seriously. The Pharisees, however, would have had no idea how Jesus was going to die, but they knew how dangerous Herod could be. They had ample cause to fear Herod’s wrath should he learn that they had tipped Jesus off about his homicidal intentions. Then, there was the separate risk they faced if their boss found out what they had done. Caiaphas, the head priest of the Temple, had no more love for Jesus than Herod did, and he likely had zero tolerance for disobedience from his priests. Caiaphas had to keep the Hebrew people safe by working with Herod as well as Pontius Pilate, neither of whom would have been easily managed. If his priests were caught interfering in Herod’s plans, Caiaphas could be blamed for failing to control them. And if Pilate decided that Caiaphas had lost control of the Temple, he might assert his own authority by turning his exceptionally well-armed and brutal soldiers loose on the citizens of Jerusalem during Passover. Blood would run in the streets. As we’ll be reminded during Holy Week, it was Caiaphas who argued for Jesus’s death by telling the Sanhedrin that “it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” We can wonder whether Caiaphas would have been equally willing to sacrifice two insubordinate priests to keep the peace with Herod and Pilate.

It's a great shortcoming of Christianity that, over the centuries, our love for Jesus has too often been expressed in an ugly antisemitism that waxes and wanes but never disappears. To be clear, if you've ever heard, thought, or said that "the Jews" killed Jesus, that is just plain *wrong*. Jesus was killed by the authority figures of his day, and the eagle of Rome played a far greater role in his death than Herod the Fox did. It doesn't help that many of our traditional Gospel readings for Holy Week have been mistranslated to refer to the Hebrew people, and particularly the Pharisees, as if they were a unified monolith. They were not. We'll be careful to translate our Holy Week readings more accurately. Meanwhile, please remember that many people were unable to meet the challenge presented by Jesus's life, ministry, and crucifixion. We can learn from their mistakes, and we must admire the courage of the precious few who did better, including the two brave Pharisees who risked their own lives to keep Jesus safe.

So, what can we take away from this Gospel passage? It tells us, among other things, that it's not our job to cater to worldly authorities. It's our job to put our fears aside as the two Pharisees did and follow Jesus, doing our part to bring the Kingdom of God more fully into our broken world. That's easier when worldly authorities pursue policies that serve God's children. We can more readily feed the hungry, clothe the naked, tend the sick, visit the prisoner, and welcome the stranger if we can draw on institutional resources. But when worldly authorities throw up obstacles or institutional resources are withdrawn, we're still obliged to do our Father's work. We don't get to throw up our hands in despair. Rather, as John Wesley urged in his 1799 sermon on "The Use of Money," our job is to "employ whatever God has intrusted [us] with, in doing good, all possible good, in every possible kind and degree, to the household of faith, to all [people]." And as we seek to follow Jesus's example in doing good, we are also called to remember this: foxes are nothing to fear when the Son of God stands beside us. *Amen*.