

Lent II, Seeking God's Ways: From Fear to Compassion – Standing up to the Fox, Being Gathered to the Hen

Good morning. Last week as we began our journey through Lent, we found ourselves seeking God's ways as we were led by the Spirit in the Wilderness. There, in the barren landscape of the wilderness, we were encouraged to find God at work within us, moving us from being a people tempted by false forms of security and control to being a people whose trust in God's provision opens us up to be a people who generously give of ourselves.

Today, we are no longer in the wilderness. Today, we find ourselves travelling with Jesus through the smaller towns and villages of the countryside. It is in the countryside that the Gospels present the majority of Jesus' ministry as taking place. It was in these towns and villages, as the Gospels describe it, that Jesus encountered people who were spiritually oppressed, stricken with illness, and socially under-privileged or ostracized. As he encountered these people, he also taught the crowds accompanying him, exhorting them with his prophetic word to love enemies and to forgive sins (Lk. 6:27-31). He also spoke difficult, provocative, and biting words of woe and judgement against cities that refused to listen to the prophetic word of God—who refused to repent from sin and evil (Lk. 10:13-17). And he did all of these things with no single "home base," no campaign centre to work out of, with only a rag-tag group of followers to accompany him. In many ways the gospels depict Jesus as a kind of Jonah figure, called to a prophetic ministry that involved travelling to village after village and speaking on behalf of God the words that were meant to bite to the heart and spur people on to true repentance and faithful living.

It is this last aspect to Jesus' ministry, this prophetic challenge to cities and social orders that should stand out to us today as we consider the scripture from Luke 13. Jesus lived out his

ministry with the full knowledge that his message was directed not only at the hearts and minds of individuals and their inner-life, but also directed at the political and social orders of the cities and also the empire under which his people lived. He knew that this made his ministry inherently scandalous, even dangerous. He also knew that at some point his actions would inevitably result in a clash with political powers, powers that used ruthless violence as a tool not only to suppress prophetic rebellion but also to strike fear into the hearts of anyone that might follow such a rebellion. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus' knowledge that his message was to result in a clash with ruling authorities is alluded to throughout the periodic reminders that Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem—the climactic destination of his ministry.¹

At Luke 9:51, in fact, we encounter a turning point in Luke's telling of the stories of Jesus where Luke says that Jesus had now "set his face to go to Jerusalem." To "set your face" is to turn with intention and as Jesus turned his face to Jerusalem, he did so like a Jonah who had accepted the call of God upon him to preach about repentance and the coming kingdom to the people there too. Would the people of Jerusalem repent as Nineveh did? Would the rulers decree a national call to repentance as the kings and nobles did in Nineveh? Jesus seems to have had a sense that they would not, at least not initially, and that Jerusalem's refusal would result in his own message being suppressed, likely violently. Perhaps this is why when someone approached him eager to follow him anywhere, Jesus responded with a pretty bad sales pitch, saying: "Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Lk. 9:58). I find it notable, given our scripture reading today where Jesus only a short while later calls Herod a "Fox," that foxes are mentioned here as having "holes" to rest in whereas Jesus has nowhere to lay his head. While we will revisit Jesus' insult of Herod more a bit later, I can't help

¹ The Gospel of John is unique in having Jesus visit Jerusalem with more frequency.

but already note the way that Jesus depicts a contrast between those who have found stable and secure places to “rest” in this world, and the Son of Man, whose life of self-giving and compassion makes him always a pilgrim in this world. With these words Jesus paints a picture of his prophetic ministry as an itinerant ministry, a ministry that is “on the way” and so inherently exposed to the threats that come with having “nowhere to lay” your head.

One of the other reasons that Jesus’ prophetic ministry was dangerous was because it was happening under the watchful eye of the Roman empire. While Rome tolerated the Jewish people and their religious observances, and at times even allowed them to thrive economically, the threat of the empire’s wrath was always looming and so it wasn’t unusual to live in a steady state of fear and social compliance to the order dictated by the empire. Historically, conquered peoples, like the Jewish people in the Roman empire, experience much of life as socially and politically fragile. Sometimes it only takes one social or political development or movement or uprising within a region, district, or city to draw attention from the ruling empire and its often-violent modes of suppression of all possible rebellions. Unsurprisingly, this social and political fragility disciplines local populations into being compliant people whose wills and desires are bent to accommodate those of the rulers, and who often choose to stay quiet in the face of injustice if it means that they can live with a semblance of stability and continued support.

The Jewish people had already had a long history of struggling to balance its adherence to God’s law with the demands that come with being ruled by foreign empires. Sometimes they successfully subverted the influence of the empire and found creative ways to live faithfully. Here the case of Daniel and his friends, who stood up courageously in the face of the threat of empire and were successful comes to mind. It didn’t always go that way, of course, and scripture also gives us plenty of examples from the prophets of when God’s law was abandoned for

political advantage, even at the expense of the most vulnerable. There may very well have been some of this going on in Jesus' day. Local or regional political rulers in Palestine in the last century BC and first century CE often work closely with the Roman empire, either out of a feeling of desperation or for the purposes of achieving their own increase in wealth and status. These local rulers would even take on the violent characteristics of the empire as a way of managing their own social order. Better to “nip any rebellion or challenge to political order in the bud” locally before the empire got wind of it—and besides, keeping the “peace” just so happened to be a politically expedient act for the rulers. Local rulers pat the empires back, the empire pats the rulers back.

Two such rulers that were closely tied to the interest of the Roman empire come to mind from the New Testament, namely the looming figure of Herod the Great and his son Herod Antipas. These Herods are prime examples of a local tyrants ruling in the time of Jesus. We first hear of Herod the Great early in the Gospel of Matthew when he is trying to track down and kill the infant Jesus—again, squashing anyone that might threaten the current political order. In our scripture from today's passage, we find some Pharisees warning Jesus about Herod the Great's son, Herod Antipas, who seems to have followed in his father's footsteps in terms of some of his violent approaches to managing potential rebellions against the political order within his region of Galilee and Perea. Herod Antipas had John the Baptist imprisoned and later beheaded, for example, because John criticized Herod for not following Jewish law (Lk. 3:19-20; Mt. 14:1-11).² Herod was thus, unsurprisingly, known as a violent ruler, a “fox,” among the people, including among Jesus and his disciples. When Herod got wind of Jesus' prophetic ministry and all of the

² The Matthean account includes a note that Herod was “grieved” at the prospect of having John beheaded. Here we should not read into this any compassion on Herod's part, only fear arising out of the potential anger coming from the crowds who saw John as a prophet (cf. Mt. 14:5).

healing and preaching he was up to, it sounded all too familiar. Is this John the Baptist raised from the dead, he thought (Lk? 9:7)? Herod had Jesus on his radar and tried, Luke says, to “see” Jesus (9:9) to assess the potential threat level Jesus represented to his rule and to the so-called “peace” afforded by the Roman empire.

Apparently, some Pharisees had got wind of Herod’s desire to see Jesus and they read between the lines in their warning to Jesus: “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you” (Lk. 13:31). What had Jesus been up to that Herod did not take kindly to? We have already reviewed some of Jesus’ activities: casting out demons, curing people who were ill, and bringing the prophetic message of the coming kingdom of God in the territory of Galilee that Herod ruled over. For these reasons, apparently, Herod wanted to kill Jesus. Jesus’ response to the Pharisees’ warning is striking:

"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. Yet 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.'"

To creatively paraphrase what Jesus was saying here, we might put it this way:

“Go and tell that ruthless tyrant for me, “Look. I’m not afraid of you. Here’s the deal. I’m going to finish up my ministry work here for a few more days and then I will move on from your region. Your threats don’t scare me—don’t bother leaving your safe little hiding hole on account of me. The end-goal of my ministry is in Jerusalem anyway, and it is there that I must go. I know what I’m up against. There’s been an ugly history of prophets meeting their fate there, but go there I must.”

Striking in Jesus’ response to the threat of Herod is that he wasn’t afraid to mince words with a violent political ruler. His compassion for the people in need in the Galilee region was greater than his fear of the consequences that came from challenging Herod.

What Jesus does next is also striking. After standing up to a political tyrant, he utters a prophetic lament in the style of Israel’s prophets delivering the Word of the Lord to the people:

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! See, 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.'" (Luke 13:32)

Let's unpack this lament a bit. It helps to remember that this is God speaking through Jesus, his prophetic servant, to the people of God. Jesus is the prophet sent to Jerusalem to help gather God's children together as a people living lives of justice and faithfulness to the God of the covenant. God has been desiring throughout Israel's history to gather them so, but the people's desires have not always matched God's. The people that Jesus would eventually preach to in Jerusalem had also turned their desires and their wills away from God's. Why had they turned away, we might wonder? What was it about God, the mother hen, that the people did not desire?

I wonder, as we consider the tenuous political environment that the people lived in, and as we remember Jesus' words to Herod, whether part of what held the people back from desiring the hen was their fear of the fox; fear that following the law of God would make them stand out a bit too much, that it would put them at odds with ruling authorities; or fear that if they did not accept and conform to an unjust economic order they would face their own economic loss; or perhaps their fear that if they challenged social orders and stood with the oppressed and the vulnerable, that they would become the oppressed and the vulnerable. Fear shapes and forms our desires in all kinds of negative ways, and I can't help but think that part of Jesus' prophetic call to repentance was a call to let go of the fear of the fox and instead be gathered to the compassionate God, the mother hen. Jesus lived as an example of one whose trust in the embrace of God empowered him to be compassionate in defiance of his fears and he called others to follow his lead in this.

The prophetic judgment Jesus speaks on behalf of God against Jerusalem is that without letting go of the fear of the fox, the “house,” the Jerusalem temple, “the symbolic center and seat of authority” of the people, will be “left to you.”³ This phrase, “your house will be left to you,” as scholars note, is an image of the “departure of God’s glory” from the temple, from among the people. The departure is not permanent and it is not retributive. Jesus does say that the divine presence can and will return, but it will return when the people are willing to welcome God back in by being gathered in welcome of the compassionate Messiah who comes in the name of the Lord.⁴ Jesus’ prophetic words against Jerusalem may sound harsh, but like all of Israel’s prophets, his warning is given in the hope that it really would produce repentance and new life—that the people really would turn from their fear and embrace compassion.

We’ve spent time considering the way that Jesus refused to let fear of Herod stop him from engaging in his compassionate ministry in the countryside. We have also considered the word of judgment that Jesus spoke against the people of Jerusalem in his lament. Now comes the hard part for us this morning. We are invited to take a moment and consider, who are we in this story? Who do we identify with? I imagine none of us will instinctively identify ourselves with the bloodthirsty Herod, with the fox. But perhaps we might more readily identify ourselves with the residents of Jerusalem that Jesus laments over? Might we identify, at least in part, with them, despite all of the obvious differences between their place in history and our own?⁵ Do we desire to be gathered together to the compassionate God who calls us to live compassionately? Or, have our desires been shaped by our fears, whatever they may be? Fears of political unrest? Fears of

³ Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, 224.

⁴ Tannehill, *Luke*, 225.

⁵ Clearly there are many differences between us and the residents of 1st century Jerusalem, not least of which is the fact that we are not a conquered people living under an “empire.” On the other hand, we do live as the people of God under a worldly rule and authority that we regularly submit to in any number of ways.

those that are different from us? Fears of losing our hard-won social status or security? When prophets come among us and speak a difficult word to us, do we listen, or do we shut our ears? God addresses us with the call to move from fear to compassion—to stand up for what is right even if there is a cost.

Perhaps some of us don't identify with either Herod or the people of Jerusalem. Perhaps some of us find ourselves identifying most with Jesus this morning. Maybe we find ourselves stirred with righteous anger, ready to stand up to our modern-day Herods, to the people who seek to use fear to shape our desires. If so, that's great. We need that passion within our congregational life—we need the prophetic word to stir us to righteous anger against powers that use fear to beat people down. We need people ready to say: "Go tell that fox...." Regardless of who you identified with this morning, all of us are called this morning to follow Jesus in standing up to the fox by letting go of our fears and to be gathered to the hen as we embrace compassion. One way we might accept this call this morning and throughout our week would be to take time to ask God to help us name our fears and then ask God to help us release those fears. Maybe we can spend more time in worship response discussing what fears God may be calling us to let go of as we embrace a life of compassion. As we sing our hymn of response from VT #540, "Will you come and Follow Me" in just a moment, I encourage you to take special note of the lyrics, and imagine it as if it is being spoken by Jesus on the outskirts of our city, as he prepares to address us and gather us to God. If we strain our ears, we can hear Jesus say:

Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around,
through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?
AMEN. May it be so, Lord Jesus.