

Luke 13:31-35
A hen in a house of foxes.

Ruskin Falls, March 10, 2019
Pulaski Heights Presbyterian Church
1st Sunday in Lent

TEXT (NRSV)

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him [Jesus], "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He 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. 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.' 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.'"

(1)

Some Pharisees are concerned about Jesus's well-being. They are aware that Jesus has been saying and doing things that have made him the target of Roman imperial suspicion. More particularly right now, they know that Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great and now Rome's ruler over Galilee and Peraea, is suspicious of Jesus. This is the same Herod Antipas who earlier had had John the Baptizer arrested and, in the end, killed. And Pharisees have come warning Jesus: "Beware! Now Herod wants *you* dead!"

And this isn't just some *personal* grudge Herod holds against Jesus. This is bigger than that. This has to do with the very governance of the Roman Empire. Not just with respect to Herod, but at every crucial turn, on issues vital to imperial interests, on issues important to the Roman meaning of peace and law and order, Jesus keeps saying and doing things that smack of disloyalty to and even rebellion against the Roman way.

(2)

Many Christians once said the Jews killed Jesus, not the Romans. That's inaccurate, of course. Death on a *cross* in the Roman Empire was an act of killing carried out by and only by the state. In the Roman Empire, crucifixion was the government's way of executing runaway slaves and insurrectionist rebels who posed a threat to Roman peace and law and order. If all we knew about Jesus was that he died on a cross in the first-century Roman Empire, we would know that he was executed by the state either for being a runaway slave or for being connected to rebellion against imperial rule.

To be sure, Jews *were* involved in Jesus's death – mainly the Jewish leaders of the Jerusalem temple, who were predominantly Sadducees. Remember: A foreign power trying to maintain the military occupation of another land does well to have *collaborators* among the native population. An occupier does well to have locals who will use their position and influence to help the occupying forces preserve what they call law and order. And that was the role of the leaders of the Jerusalem temple. That doesn't mean they all simply coddled up to the Romans with glee – although, for many of them, collaboration did translate into good money and a posh lifestyle in a land where most people were somewhere between poor and very poor. But also they knew this: For most Jews, Roman imperial oppression meant having to endure considerable trials and suffering. Jewish resentment toward Rome was widespread and ran deep. And, if no one was ready, willing, and able to work *with* the Roman Empire to keep the peace, then that resentment

was going to explode into the kind of revolt that would cause Rome to respond with massively destructive, even annihilating, force.

That is, in fact, what happened some thirty-five years after Jesus's crucifixion: Great crowds of oppressed Jews finally did revolt, attacking and even killing many who had collaborated with Rome. The Romans, in turn, called in a massive military attack. In the end, Rome reduced Jerusalem to ruins and the temple to a pile of rubble. *Up until that point*, though, Rome cultivated a ruling class among the Jews themselves, to help keep the Roman peace by keeping a lid on resentment and rebellion. The temple priesthood played that role.

Of course, by then, Jerusalem already had a long history of misguided governance. Let me explain.

(3)

The Old Testament story of God's creation of the people of Israel makes clear that God created Israel to be a people who would be *radically different* from other peoples.

It began with God's call to Abraham, to leave his home in Ur for a place and way of life yet to be revealed. For centuries before the time of Abraham, people had lived in tribes and villages that were *not* divided into "the rich and the poor" or "the ruling class and the peasants", or "the military and the civilian population." Abraham's time, however, was a time in the history of civilization, when tribes and villages were becoming subsumed into a new political entity, the *centralized state*. A centralized state was made up of a well-to-do ruling elite that included the king with his standing army, atop a social pyramid in which the vast majority of the people scratched out a living in the sands at the bottom. God created *Israel*, however, to be *different* from that. God intended Israel to remain tribal – to remain communitarian, if you will. God intended Israel *not* to have a king, but, instead, to look to *God alone* as king and to live together as all equally God's beloved children, in ways that reflect the aims and purposes not of human laws but of *God's law*, *God's command*, *God's word*. That meant, among other things, that Israel was not to become a social pyramid, with a small number of *haves* at the top who lord it over the *have-nots* below them. It meant that the Israelites were not to pledge allegiance to anyone or anything but God alone.

Along the way, however, the Israelites lost their nerve. Fearing that they were going to be overrun by nations that did have kings and standing armies, they cried out to God to let *them* have a king, to let *them* become a centralized state. God gave them their wish. But, God gave them also this *admonition*: Kings in Israel are *not* to rule like worldly kings. *Worldly* kings focus on their own and on their cronies' well-being at the expense of those they rule. Rather than *lording it over* the people, however, *Israel's* kings are to tend to them *as shepherds tend sheep*. They are to see to it that the people have green pastures and clear waters, that they grow healthy and strong, and that they are protected against whatever threatens harm, healed when injuries do occur, and enabled to live safe and unafraid on land that they know belongs to God. The king is not to lord it over the people for his own sake; rather, in the way of a shepherd, the king is to enable all to thrive and flourish as God's beloved children.

(4)

That is not how things worked out. The books of 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings, and 1st and 2nd Chronicles, together with the books of the prophets, tell the story of the Israelite monarchy's slide into materialism, corruption, injustice, and violence, with the temple priesthood

and commercial leaders sliding right along with the kings, hand in greedy and often bloody hand. Israel's political, religious, and commercial leaders turned Israel into a social pyramid *just like the other nations*. Now, *just like all the other nations*, Israelite society consisted of a small ruling class lording it over the poor, the needy, the powerless. Jerusalem, the city center of Israelite life, now housed a royal palace, a holy temple supportive of the palace, and commercial interests that fed on the palace, all sitting comfortably atop the social pyramid, lording it over all the nobodies below them.

This social pyramid was a major factor behind the formation of what we know from the Bible as the *prophetic movement*. Most prophets were *not* part of this movement. Most prophets were simply yes-men to the king; they maintained comfortable courtly positions by having a knack for saying the positive and optimistic things the king wanted to hear. There were, however, also those you and I know as *biblical* prophets. These were individuals driven by what they called "the word of God" *to speak God's truth to worldly power*. They declared that the social pyramid that Israel had become, amounted to moral bankruptcy and was a disgrace to God. The prophets pointed out and denounced as godless the selfishness, deceit, hardness of heart, injustice, and violence that Israel's political, religious, and commercial leaders had become enmeshed in through furthering their own narrowly private interests at the expense of the true good of the wider community. The biblical prophets declared that the kingdom that Israel had become *deserved to fall*. They insisted that what Israel had become is to be replaced by a kingdom that really and truly befits *God's* good aims and purposes on this earth.

Jerusalem – which is to say: the political, religious, and commercial powers-that-be who ruled over the children of Israel – *Jerusalem* did not appreciate these prophets. Jerusalem ridiculed, hounded, denounced, slandered, arrested, stigmatized, and sometimes even murderously persecuted these prophets. Jerusalem was too morally bankrupt to take them seriously as actually sent by God to proclaim God's word. Nevertheless, sent by God they were.

(5)

In the passage we're reading today, Jesus publicly identifies himself with the prophets, and he identifies his mission with that of the prophetic movement.

When Jesus calls Herod "*that fox*," he (at great personal risk) gives public expression to dismay, distrust, and disdain for Herod's rule – which is to say: for the way the *empire* rules – which is to say: for the way the *prophets* see *human* rulers everywhere and always tending to rule, namely: through the coercive furtherance of their own narrowly private interests at the expense of the true good of the wider community.

When Jesus links "that fox" with *Jerusalem* as "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it," he is (at great personal risk) making publically clear that he's come, as did the prophets before him, in the name of the God whose thoughts are not how this world is being led to think, and whose ways are not the ways this world does business, and whose ultimate aim is *to end the present order of things*, for the sake of the future that *God's own word* is calling into being.

When Jesus says, "that fox" and "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," he's saying that the ways of all the nations in this world, the ways of all the families of the earth, the ways we humans everywhere have come to order God's world, are tragically terribly *at odds* with the life that God created humankind to know, enjoy, and share. The present order of things is therefore tragically terribly

at odds with the future that God is out to *replace* it with. When Jesus says, “that fox” and “Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” he’s saying that the present order of things is so enmeshed in selfishness, deceit, hardness of heart, injustice, and violence that it is a disgrace to God; it has no place in God’s world and, so, no place in the future that God is calling into being.

On the other hand: When Jesus says, “that fox” and “Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” he is not *raging* against us for the selfishness, deceit, hardness of heart, injustice, and violence that we’re up to our ears in. Rather, he’s calling to us like a *mother hen* out to gather her brood under her wings. That is to say, *despite* how caught up we have become in our world’s ungodly ways, Jesus is as determined as a mother hen concerned for her brood, to gather us as close as possible into the compassionate embrace of God’s redeeming grace and love.

When Jesus says, “that fox” and “Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” he’s calling us to *recognize* what we ourselves have done and let happen to God’s good earth, and he’s calling us to *repent*. He knows we cannot free *ourselves* from all that’s wrong with the world; he knows we cannot make ourselves *pure*; he knows we’re too entangled in the way things are, to extricate ourselves and begin living like *angels*. Nevertheless, because God is the Lord of mercy-filled forgiveness, redeeming grace, and eternally compassionate love, Jesus knows that humanity *does* have a future with God. He knows that God is *not* out to *force* God’s future on us, but that God *is*, in all the mystery of God’s ways, out to *love* us *into* that future. Moreover, he knows that *repentance of sin* is an expression of *desire* to number *not* among the killers of the prophets, but among those who truly *welcome* the future that God intends. He knows that when we recognize and repent the selfishness, deceit, hardness of heart, injustice, and violence of our world, we’ve actually begun to *live* not simply as *sinners*, but as *forgiven sinners*. We’ve actually begun to *live* as those who *know* we can and must make some changes and move our world in a new and prophetic direction. We’ve actually begun to *live* in this, our sinful world, as children of God.

You and I live in a *house of foxes*; we live in a world where selfishness, deceit, hardness of heart, injustice, and violence run rampant and threaten to undo us. And God is guarding us in this fox house through a *mother hen named Jesus Christ*. God is guarding us in this fox house through a mother hen who is not *forcing* us to change, but who *is* resolutely determined to *shelter* us so intimately with the forgiveness, grace, and love of God, that we, in time, will find ourselves *drawn* to change – will find ourselves drawn to live differently than before – will find ourselves drawn to alter how our world is run – will find ourselves drawn into the courage to declare in the very midst of this, our house of foxes: *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, almighty God – almighty in forgiveness, almighty in grace, almighty in love – whose justice and peace one day shall reign in every heart in every part of all creation. Amen.*