



Sunday, March 16, 2025
Second Sunday in Lent
Luke 13:31-35
"Outfoxing the Fox"
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

We talk about Lent as a journey. But what journey, specifically, are we on? Luke makes it clear back in Chapter 9:51: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." Set his face like flint, in the prophecy of Isaiah 50: "I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame." A picture of unwavering determination to persevere in a mission that would culminate in the harshest punishment imaginable. Yet in this, mankind's ultimate humiliation would be revealed as God's greatest triumph. This is the journey we are on.

The determination of Jesus to complete what his Father called him to do is why Herod was so easily outfoxed. Herod recognized Jesus as a threat. Based on what some Pharisees told Jesus, Herod apparently tried to obstruct Jesus' mission by ordering his execution. But as ruler of Galilee, Herod did not have the authority to order Jesus' death. Only the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, could approve that – as he ultimately did.

Herod of course knew that. So did he bribe these Pharisees to convey the death threat to Jesus? Being conniving ran in the family. This Herod, known as Antipas, was son of Herod the Great. Perhaps you remember how that Herod also tried to do away with Jesus but was himself outfoxed by the magi, as Matthew's Gospel tells us. Herod wanted the magi to return from their visit to the manger and tell him exactly where the baby was so that Herod could have him killed. Instead they went home by another way. They outfoxed Herod in that earlier episode -- but at a terrible cost; Herod was so enraged that he unleashed a gruesome massacre of all children in and around Bethlehem age 2 and younger. But Jesus and his family had already fled to Egypt.

Here in Herod Antipas we have a less murderous character but no less cunning. His task of getting rid of Jesus was more formidable, since Jesus was by then well established as a healer, fiery prophet, and exposé of hypocrisy. One chapter earlier, Jesus announced, in the presence of a crowd of thousands, "Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing is secret that will not become known." If that did not strike fear into the hearts of the stakeholders of power, I can't imagine what would have.

Herod has been confused about who Jesus is since earlier in Chapter 9. He's heard about Jesus but hasn't been able to make sense of conflicting information. Some say he's John the Baptist raised from the dead. Others say he's Elijah or another ancient prophet. Herod knows the first can't be true. "John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?" Luke then tells us, "And Herod tried to see him."

Herod does not set eyes on Jesus until the trial in Luke 23 when Pilate sends Jesus to him. There we hear, "When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign."

Glad. A sign. Sounds innocent? Hardly. Listen to how Luke continues: “He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate.”

Contemptuousness. Mockery. The only weapons Herod is able to wield against Jesus. Foxes were considered lesser, unimpressive animals in Jewish culture. That’s who Herod is – a fox, not a lion.

Herod’s attempt in in today’s reading to divert Jesus from his mission is therefore the act of a fox. A weak effort. Did the Pharisees who informed Jesus of the plot have any hope that Jesus would react in fear? Ordinary human nature would likely respond to a death threat with the flight instinct. Flee, get out of there, hide out until the danger is over. If Jesus had been intimidated in this way, his disciples and followers would have kept him safe. But what would that mean for his mission? The course to Jerusalem that he knew he must be following? It would mean diversion and disruption. One whose face was set like flint would not allow it.

Jesus’ response to the Pharisees was blunt. “You go tell that fox I’m busy.” That fox. That inept ruler, too weak to follow through on a threat. This puts Herod in his place, cuts him down to size, he who apparently thought he was a lion in being able to order Jesus’ execution. “You go tell him I’m busy. I’ve got work to do -- casting out demons, performing cures, and finishing my work only on the third day” – a reference to the Great Three days of his Passion.

So there we have it. Herod: Prepare to die. Jesus: Forget it. I have a job to do.

Jesus knew very well who Herod was and what he could or could not do. What about us, we who are bombarded with conflicting voices? How do we know which ones to follow? How do we resist the temptation by those in power to trick us into doing things that would disrupt or divert our mission?

Fortunately we have Paul today Philippians, who gives us everything we need. We are to live as citizens of heaven who find in the cross the true description of how God in Christ has come to serve. That is where our allegiance belongs, not to those whose god is the belly and who are destined for destruction because their minds are set on earthly things. Instead, we stand with the crucified and risen Christ. Love and mercy are the central words of our constitution as citizens of heaven.

We endure humiliation knowing that he will transform our earthy bodies into glorious bodies like his own. We know what awaits us and therefore we are free to endure all things for Christ’s sake. Free without fear: For as we just heard in Psalm 27: ‘The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?’

Jesus’ great journey in Luke was not only to end in Jerusalem – it was to end at the cross. Throughout Lent we too are preparing to experience Jesus’ cross. Today calls us to consider whether the decisions we make are taking us there or whether other voices are attempting to distract or divert us.

Are we living as representatives of God’s kingdom? Are we living in the shape of the cross? A shape at whose heart, as GK Chesterton put it, is collision and contradiction—but whose four arms

can extend forever without altering its shape? In this same way, does our embrace of the values of God's kingdom extend into the world without restriction? Or do we find ourselves tempted to curve inward, thereby choking off the infinite love and mercy that flows out to the world from Christ through the cross?

Be strong. Take heart. Cling to that true citizenship which you received at your baptism. And don't let yourself be outfoxed.