

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Lent 2, Series C
Saturday, March 12th, 2022
Sunday, March 13th, 2022

Sermon: The Fox and the Hen

Texts: Luke 13:31-35

Focus: God longs for our repentance as a mother longs to protect her children.

Function: That they would turn from their sin and return to God for mercy.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: “All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me...” (SC, 1st Article of the Apostles’ Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. 🎵 “What does the fox say?” That question—and song by the band Ylvis—became a YouTube sensation 5-6 years ago. Foxes are fascinating, beautiful creatures. I always thrill when I see one in the wild, whether in the woods or trotting down my street. But foxes tend to get a bad rap in Western culture. Ever since ancient times, foxes in stories have been depicted as sly and cunning, as in Aesop’s *Fables*. To call someone a fox was not exactly a backhanded compliment, indicating them to be crafty wise and deceitfully cunning.

What *does* the fox say? According to the Pharisees in our Gospel lesson, the fox known as King Herod wanted Jesus dead. “At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you’” (Luke 13:31, ESV).¹

Ordinarily, the Pharisees and Herodians did not cooperate with each other. In fact, they hated each other. The Herodians represented the kind of wild, Hedonistic, political cynicism that the Pharisees rejected in their fanatical attempt to keep God’s Law. But when it came to Jesus, at least, they could agree that something had to be done (cf. Matt. 22:16; Mark 3:6; 12:3).

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Initially, Herod feared Jesus. He worried that Jesus was John the Baptist risen from the dead (Mark 6:16). And because John was the forerunner of Jesus, and Jesus' early preaching sounded much like John's, who can blame Herod for imagining that? But if Jesus were John returned from the grave, that did not bode well for Herod, who had imprisoned and beheaded the Baptist for publicly criticizing Herod's love affair and subsequent marriage to his brother Philip's wife. Herod never could shake that guilty conscience, could he?

According the Gospel writers, Herod had great interest in meeting Jesus (Luke 9:9; 23:8). His fascination was like that of a kid at a carnival wanting to see a magic show. He hoped that Jesus would perform a miracle and put on a little spectacle for his own private delight. Of course, Jesus does nothing of the sort. Jesus wasn't a showman. He's not a trained monkey that does tricks on command. He is the Son of God.

With all this history, it's hard to say whether or not the Pharisees were telling the truth. Did Herod really want to kill Jesus, or was that a lie? And even if he really were trying to kill Jesus, what interest did the Pharisees have in "warning" Jesus? What motivated them? Was it genuine concern for Jesus—or just an intimidation campaign? Perhaps we'll never know.

But we *do* know what Jesus said to them: "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course'" (Luke 13:32, ESV).² Jesus called Herod a fox. And it wasn't a compliment. Herod was cunning, sly, and politically savvy. And although he was splendidly rich, he was drowning in moral poverty.

But Jesus didn't stop with his scorn against Herod. He also turns on the Pharisees themselves. He shoots the messenger and delivers a chilling prophecy—a damning lament:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under wings, and you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34).

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Jesus weeps over the city of Jerusalem, the place of political and religious power ever since the days of King David. He recalls and condemns her horrid history of killing the Lord's prophets and servants. (Our Old Testament lesson about Jeremiah's persecution is a perfect example).

But then Jesus makes a strange move and utters something surprising. He compares himself to a mother hen longing to gather her little chicks under her wings for their protection. But the Jewish people were unwilling to heed the call and hearken to the mother hen.

This language of motherhood surprises us. We are used to calling God our Father and using masculine pronouns to speak of God. As conservative Christians, we often deride feminist theologians who try to speak of God in feminine terminology. Before he retired from ministry, my Dad absolutely forbade his congregations to acquire the new *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW) hymnal published by the ELCA, for, as my dad contended, that hymnal "neutered Jesus" by avoiding all masculine pronouns that refer to God in the Psalms.

No, in the Lutheran Church—*Missouri* Synod, we're wary of words that speak of God as a woman or a mother. And yet Scripture plainly does resort to this kind of language at times, often in the metaphor of a mother pleading for her children:

"O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me" (Ps. 131:1-2).

"As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem" (Isa. 66:13).

"Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Isa. 49:15).

So you see? Sometimes God's Word describes him as a mother. But before we jettison all our masculine God-talk and turn into goddess worshipers, let me remind you of a very key point:

there's a big difference between metaphor and metaphysics. And saying that God is *like* a mother is not the same thing as saying that he *is* a mother. Jesus teaches us to call God "Our Father" (Matt. 6:9). And it is by the Spirit that we cry, "Abba! Father" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). So please *do not* start praying to "Our Mommy, who does art in heaven..." God is a He, not a she, it, them/they.

Nevertheless, the same tenderness that a mother has for a wayward child is a picture of the tender mercy God has for sinners like us. We may not have stoned the prophets, but we hate God's Word and reject his servants. We complain and criticize our pastors when they speak inconvenient Biblical truths that we don't want to hear. It's fine as long as the preacher talks about the sins of those people over there. But if he mentions *my* sins, now we have a problem: that hits a little bit too close to home! So we shoot the messenger. We are just as guilty as the Jewish nation.

And yet Jesus still longs to gather us under his wings to comfort us, protect us—and forgive us. The people of Jerusalem were unwilling. While the crowds hailed him as a king on Palm Sunday, they demanded on Good Friday that he be crucified. We can blame his death on King Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Jewish priests, the Roman soldiers, and the mob. We may not have driven the nails into his hands, but we might as well have. For it is for *our* sins that Jesus spread his arms on the cross and died.

And yet, because of Jesus' death and resurrection, he brings healing in his wings to any and all who are willing to turn away from sin and return to the Lord our God. He hanged on the cross spread-eagle and begs for you to come and nestle beneath his wings. He longs to cover you with his pinions, for "under his wings you will find refuge" (Ps. 91:4). Refuge from sin. Refuge from death. Refuge from darkness and self-defeat. Like a mother, he will feed you with

his Holy Word and Holy Supper, his own Body and Blood for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus weeps and cries for you to come! Are you willing? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.