

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent

RCL Lectionary, Year C

[Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18](#) / [Psalm 27](#) / [Philippians 3:17-4:1](#) / [Luke 13:31-35](#)

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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

Rules of the Henhouse

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The past few weeks, we've all watched with some wonder the remarkable foment going on in the wider country and world as a mid-term election year starts to wind up. Whether it's tea parties or the hand-wringing of the majority party, or the clash of seemingly irreconcilable agendas on healthcare. . . appeals to one thing seem to dominate our collective consciousness at this point, and that one thing is a good dose of fear – no doubt exacerbated by the dodgy recovery of the economy, ongoing unemployment, and news of earthquakes far away and tsunami warnings closer to home. We seem to live, breathe, bath, and eat fear these days.

Last week, our gospel reading had us just prior to the beginning of Jesus' ministry – his time in the wilderness, facing the temptations that every human being must face in our most basic needs for security, control, and love. This week, we fast forward in Luke to a time close the end of Jesus' public ministry. He has been identified by his followers as the Messiah, the Christ, has delivered his teachings and brought healing to the crowds, has sent out his disciples to bring God's peace and the Good News to those who need it. Jesus is now a phenomenon of first-century Palestine, noticed by not only the people, but now those who occupy and hold places of authority. So they are starting to show up with anger and threats. Jesus knows the die is cast, and he has set his face towards Jerusalem. He sees that although he will be greeted with joy in the streets, a cross awaits him there.

Today's gospel would be unexceptional in this context, were it not for the remarkable fact that the Pharisees, the pious religious authorities of their day, suddenly seem to be on Jesus' side. They've shown up again, this time not with arguments against Jesus' teachings and practices, but squawking and fluttering about the impending threat from King Herod on Jesus' life.

Herod, of course, has taken an interest in this itinerant teacher and healer and the following he has gathered to himself. Herod's interest is in part dynastic – his father, Herod the Great, had headed up numerous building projects in Jerusalem, including considerable work on the Temple. Herod Antipas, Jesus' Herod, while he received a lesser portion of his family's inheritance divided amongst brothers, was still apparently accomplished in his own building projects both literal and political. But he was also an apparent collector of scandals. If you remember, Herod imprisoned John the Baptist when he criticized Herod for marrying his brother's widow. Later, Herod did away with John the Baptist by way of a most salacious beheading, and so he is then perplexed when rumors reach him that in Jesus, John has somehow risen from the dead. And now, as Jesus' following seems to swell, Herod most naturally perceives him as a serious threat to his power.

It's easy for us urban and suburban folk to lose sight of the agricultural metaphor to which Jesus appeals so vividly in response to Herod's threat – it's one of his only scant references in the canonical gospels to foxes and perhaps his only one to hens. But, in short, he's saying there's a fox in the henhouse. The Pharisees, in this moment, are convinced the fox is Herod, the corrupt puppet king propped up by Rome, tribute, and regal ancestry. Perhaps they despise Herod because his new capital, Tiberias, is built over a graveyard, inflaming the pious sensibilities of more observant Jews. And

so Herod is the rare instance of a common enemy for them and Jesus, and so for once they come to Jesus' aid and warn him. At one level, the enemy of my enemy is indeed my friend. Maybe the Pharisees, to use today's popular vernacular, are – at least for this moment – Jesus' "frenemies!"

But Jesus knows the rules of the collective henhouse, even if the hens have stopped pecking at each other long enough to agree that something far more dangerous is afoot. And the rules of the henhouse can be summed up in one word: fear. It's fear that keeps the locals in line – fear of the imperial hammer of the Roman occupiers, fear of the Herodians and their power, fear of the religious authorities to marginalize and ostracize. Fear is what drives Herod himself, navigating the tangled tightropes between a fickle people over whom he claims right to be king, and the Roman authorities who pull the strings. Fear is what drives the religious authorities – fear of a god of piety and tightly bound traditions, and self-righteousness held close. . .fear that their authority, too, could also be undermined at any moment by the crowds, or Herod, or the Romans. But it's the marginalized and poor people with whom Jesus has most closely walked, eaten, and prayed – they are the ones most caught in the injustices of the rules of the henhouse, internalizing the agendas of their oppressors, living in fear at the edge of despair.

So Jesus refuses to give into fear and confronts it instead full in the face. He will not be cowed by Herod's corrupt and wily ways, even though Jesus has every reason to hate the king for executing his cousin, John. Nor will he turn his face from his path to Jerusalem where he expects to be welcomed by the people and despised by the authorities like the many prophets before him. He will not play by the rules of the henhouse, where everyone is either hen-pecking each other or living in abject fear of the fox. He instead insists on accepting his path and even death only on his own terms. . .on God's terms even, and no one else's.

In Jesus, the old rules of the henhouse are being overturned, and he serves as the fulcrum. So Herod's threat is ultimately moot. Even death itself is soon to be overruled. The fox himself will soon be running for cover, and the henhouse itself will be remade from top to bottom.

This is the liberating work and a promise of Christ for us. . . Because the rules of the henhouse are still kicking around, and we don't have to go far to smell the fear. Whether we are tea partiers or anxious politicians worried about our fragile majority, whether we are caught in the continuing consequences of recession or stormed up inside ourselves over relationships or our own imperfections, whether it is earthquakes or tsunamis nearby or far away. . .it doesn't matter. Today's gospel confronts all of that in us and invites us again to set aside the temptation to give into fear.

This Lent, like Jesus, we are taught to face the threat of dissolution and death not on the world's terms, but on God's. And God's terms proclaim that the offering of our own life is holy when it is done freely and for a just cause – that the fox of a death-dealing evil is de-fanged and dismissed by a self-giving love. That death itself is uprooted by the cross that stands at season's end. . . at the end of the road to Jerusalem.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, we are called to gaze upon it, to turn to it, to face it with Christ. And to welcome the one who desires to gather God's people under wings of courage and peace, hope and faith, freedom and love. Those wings that remind us that we are God's own, not ours or the world's, and that therefore, we ultimately have nothing. . .nothing at all to fear.