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Lent 2C
Peace, Seattle
March 17, 2019
Luke 13:31-35

THE FOX VS. THE HEN

The further we move into Lent the clearer it becomes that things are not going to go well for Jesus.

As he makes his way through one village after another, Jesus wins new disciples, for sure....
But his teaching also stirs up resistance and makes him enemies. Today we learn that that old fox King Herod has it in for Jesus.

So with the pressure building and his compass set on Jerusalem, the question arises:
Who, finally, will win the day—and with what methods? Will it be Jesus? Or will it be Herod?

Three competing desires, it seems, frame our gospel this morning.
Those competing desires (clear in the Greek but less clear in the English translation) are:
(1) Herod's desire to kill Jesus.
(2) Jesus' desire to act like a mother hen for Jerusalem
(3) And Jerusalem's desire to kill its prophets.

And each of these competing desires drags behind its own long bag of complex and tortured history, making our understanding of what's going on here more complicated that it may first appear.

Take, for example, the first LONGING Luke mentions: The longing of Herod to kill Jesus.

Noting that this threat against Jesus' life is enunciated by the Pharisees—a group with whom Jesus is in near-constant conflict—you have to wonder: Why are they suddenly so eager to protect this man when they've been so quick to challenge practically everything he's said and done?

Is the threat they give voice to REAL? Or is it part of a greater plan to intimidate Jesus and throw him off his game? Maybe Jesus is simply calling their bluff when he says:

GO TELL THAT FOX THAT NOTHING WILL GET IN THE WAY OF ME COMPLETING MY COURSE.

It's a message less directed, it seems to me, to Herod and more directed to those who are trying to stand between him and his destiny in Jerusalem.

Not that Herod Antipas isn't a PREDATOR—he most certainly is! He inherited that trait from his infamously bloodthirsty father, Herod the Great. Like his father, he had no qualms with having enemies "disappeared." Violence was simply a tool for coping with perceived threats; for getting his agenda enacted.

Tragically, violence as a tool has never gone out of style.

And in this gun-obsessed and social media-saturated age we now live in—as the massacre in Christchurch proves—violence against innocents as an expression of racist and supremist ideologies has no apparent limits. Time and again these tragedies have confirmed that no house of worship—of whatever stripe—can be considered safe in the face of such virulent and paranoid worldviews.

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Midway through Luke's gospel, Jesus is warned that King Herod, his cousin's killer, has Jesus in his sites, too. The question is, how will Jesus respond this time?

Will he adopt the fox's strategy—fear tactics, intimidation, assassinations, armed militias?
Or will he choose another way?

> LISTEN! I AM CASTING OUT DEMONS AND PERFORMING CURES TODAY AND TOMORROW, AND ON THE THIRD DAY I FINISH MY WORK.

Jesus will not be cowed—he is defiantly unafraid.

Yet this stance doesn't make him immune to the repeating cries and anguish and sorrow that have played out in Jerusalem for centuries and continue to play out in places of worship, schools, nightclubs, university campuses and malls in this country and around the world.

Jesus weeps today over the city that has broken the heart of God time and again; he weeps with the families of Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch; he weeps with all of us around the world who have failed to learn the things that make for peace.

> "How often"—he cries—"how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

In the end, today's gospel leaves us with many more questions than answers.

How do we even begin to make sense of the trials of our lives?
For some losses, some experiences, there can <u>be</u> no explanation, no understanding.
And clichéd attempts to make them inevitably fall hollow—or worse, add to the damage.

Other experiences of loss or deprivation may only show glimpses of a redeeming quality when they've been sifted and filtered through a lifetime of journeying. **That is the case with the extraordinary witness we know as St. Patrick.**

Born in Britain of a well-established Roman family, the grandson of a Roman priest, Patrick had little use for the Church as a child. But all that began to change when, in his early teens he was kidnapped by Irish raiders and sold into slavery in Ireland.

During six long years of captivity, with no hope for returning home, he worked as a shepherd in isolation and hardship, ill-clothed and poorly protected from the elements. Yet despite these realities Patrick found himself falling into a rhythm of daily prayer.

> "I am first of all a simple country person, a refugee, and unlearned," he later wrote. "I do not know how to provide for the future. But this I know for certain, that before I was brought low, I was like a stone lying deep in the mud. Then he who is powerful came and in his mercy pulled me out, and lifted me up and placed me on the very top of the wall."[1]

After years of ill treatment among a people who knew not Christ, Patrick was told in a dream that his opportunity to escape was at hand. Putting faith in the message, he traversed across country for hundreds of miles until he found his way to the ship which, in his dream, was awaiting him.

[1] Confession of St. Patrick, section 12.

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And through the voyage and a subsequent overland journey that was anything but direct—full of peril and threat of death—he was finally reunited with home and family.

But the Patrick who returned home was not the Patrick who'd left. How could he be?
Patrick's experience was a spiritual conversion that started him on a new path of love for God, for his neighbor, and even for his enemies.

In his potent little book, Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Life of Vocation, Parker Palmer writes:

> "Most of us arrive at a sense of self and vocation only after a long journey through alien lands… a transformative journey—full of hardships, darkness, and peril—to a sacred center…
>
> But before we come to that center, full of light, we must travel in the dark. Darkness is not the whole of the story, but it is the part of the story most often left untold."

Our world is populated with shadows, within and without. And until we are willing to own that truth, we will never be able to journey to that "center, full of light," of which the scriptures speak.

Much to the consternation of his family and the amazement of those who had enslaved him, Patrick's long journey through hardships, darkness, and peril led to him return to Ireland as a missionary, to preach and practice the love and mercy of God.

How did he manage?

- He knew the language.
- He secured the protection of local chieftains,
- he found ways of translating the Christian message symbolically using sacred images well known in Celtic culture,
- he baptized thousands in the name of the Holy Trinity,
- he established monastic church communities that taught literacy and care of the poor, and introduced methods for solving grievances without violence. These communities became the foundation stones for the spread of the Christian gospel throughout the British Isles and, through their missionary impulse, the reintroduction of the Christian faith to Europe after dark ages.[2]
- And he did all this from a place of personal humility and a profound trust in the power of Christ to transform lives in the manner that his own life had been transformed.

In the end, "Patrick's gift [to the people who had enslaved him] was his embodied Christianity. The first de-Romanized Christianity in human history, a Christianity without the social political baggage of the Greco-Roman world, a Christian faith that completely inculturated itself into the Irish scene."[3]

And so Ireland became the only land into which Christianity was introduced without bloodshed.[4]

Why? Because the man who was sent to embody the gospel among its people did so like a hen gathering her chicks rather than as fox looking to consume its prey.

> "The Lord was merciful to me a thousand, thousand times," Patrick testifies, "because he saw in me that I was ready, but that I did not know what I should do about the state of my life. There were many who forbade this mission. They even told stories among themselves behind my back, and the said: 'Why does he put himself in danger among hostile people who do not know God?' It was not that they were malicious – they just did not understand."[5]

[2] For a fascinating account of how this happened, read John Cahill's *How the Irish Saved Civilization*.
[3] John Cahill. *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, p. 148.
[4] Ibid, page 151.
[5] Confession, section 46

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"But what can I say, or what can I promise to my Lord?" "There is nothing I have that is not Christ's gift to me."[6]

The thief, the fox, comes only to steal and kill and destroy, said Jesus. I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.[7]

This Christ who showed himself to Patrick, who did not exploit his divine origin but rather emptied himself, even to the point of death on a cross, has experienced human darkness in its fiercest forms. Whatever shadows and dark places we have or will endure, we can be confident he has been there before us and will go there with us once again.

In the face of evil acts that confound and demoralize us, the question asserts itself, <u>What ARE we destined for? For darkness?</u>

<u>NO.</u>

> "You, beloved, are not in darkness" testifies Paul, "for you are all children of light and children of the day. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation, safety, wholeness, and healing through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him."

When we are washed in baptismal waters our lives become bound to his life—and not only his life but his death, too. Entering the darkness of the tomb with him, we become dead to everything that masquerades as God in our lives, and begin learning to put our trust in him first and always.

Trusting in Christ's presence above us, below us, behind and before us, we take risks—loving and forgiving, serving and sharing.

Watered by grace, our barren trees grow, our hands blossom, and our lives—lived in community—bring forth fruit that heals our neighbors' grief and pain.

Amen.

[6] Ibid, section 57
[7] John 10:10