

Sermon on Luke 13:31-35
Second Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

I grew up as a child in the 1950s and 60s with the advent of a new invention called television. So I grew up watching cartoons on tv – like Looney Tunes – which gave voices and human characteristics to animals, through the wonders of *animation*. Besides Bugs Bunny and other characters, there was a blowhard rooster called Leghorn, whose job was to guard the chickens in the hen house from the wily foxes of the world. The fox's aim was to get into the chicken coop so that he could make off with some defenseless chicks for dinner. Who would protect the chicks from the dreaded fox? Probably not Leghorn – who was more like the Donald Trump of the poultry family. This was the plot of many a cartoon. Please keep this image of the fox and the chickens in mind as we explore today's gospel – a much more serious message than the cartoons of American television!

Ever since Jesus descended the mountain of the Transfiguration, met with Moses and Elijah, and was affirmed by the voice of God as “My Beloved Son”, Luke tells the story of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Along the way he was teaching in the synagogues of the towns and villages, healing the sick, casting out demons, and proclaiming the good news of God to all the people. Like his time in the wilderness after he was baptized, tempted by the devil, this journey's destination would bring the greatest opposition and challenges of all – leading to his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. And in the passage we just heard, some Pharisees warned Jesus to get away, because King Herod wanted to kill him. (He had beheaded John the Baptist, so this was no empty threat.)

Just a reminder – this is the second King Herod mentioned in the gospels. The first King Herod is the one who was so paranoid about a new heir to the throne being born to take his place, that he had all the infant sons of Bethlehem mothers slaughtered by his troops, as soon as he learned that Jesus had been born. At that time, Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt like refugees, to save him from King Herod's wrath. But many innocent children and their parents suffered from Herod's paranoia. Now, this new King Herod, a son of the original king, called Herod Antipas, was propped up to rule by the Romans in the region north and east of Jerusalem, across the Jordan, called the Tetrarchy of Galilee and Perea. Herod was insecure on his throne, and had opened himself to criticism from John the Baptist for taking his brother Philip's wife for himself. His wife wanted John dead. In the story of her daughter's Salome's sultry dance before the king, she made him promise to give her John the Baptist's head on a silver platter. And now the

Baptist was dead. Would Jesus and other prophets be next? This fear would be enough to silence most prophets and critics of the king, but not Jesus.

So some Pharisees warned Jesus to run. (Maybe they were concerned for his health, maybe they just wanted him to be quiet. We don't know.) So what was Jesus' reaction? It wasn't to ask "where should I hide?" He didn't cut short the message and run. No – he said, "*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.*" He wasn't going to stop doing his work of proclaiming the good news, despite threats by such powerful forces as the king who supposedly ruled the places where Jesus preached – who could do him real harm. So, we know that Jesus had courage. His work was too important to let a blowhard leader like Herod frighten him off with threats.

But then, in his very next breath, Jesus says something that shows how he realizes that he will die for his work – in 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!...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.'*" It's a reference to Palm Sunday, when many would welcome him to Jerusalem with palm branches and hosannas – into a city where he would be arrested and tried at night, and killed by noon the next day.

Still, Jesus spoke with compassion and mourning for Jerusalem, all that it symbolized as a holy city deceived, and its people – who continually killed the prophets whom God sent. He wished that he could change the outcome – he wanted to comfort and protect them, like a "hen gathering her brood under her wings". He shows by this image how he was the total opposite of King Herod – that fox, the cunning hunter of defenseless baby chicks, - but he, the "motherly" protector who would use his own body to shield God's people. How he wished he could actually protect his people from the fate that awaited them (from the Romans, who would destroy them, and their leaders, who would betray them). He couldn't do that, but he would continue his work of speaking God's truth, and giving hope.

We know how the story ends – and it appears that Jesus did, too. Whether Jesus could tell the future, we don't know. But we do know that Jesus understood the consequences of continuing to openly defy King Herod, the political and the religious leaders, and leaving himself so vulnerable. He knew that his words and actions, once he got to Jerusalem, would be too agitational for such leaders to tolerate, so his life would be forfeit. And he also knew that the coming violent rebellion of the people against Rome, the most powerful empire the world had ever

known, was doomed to failure, and the holy city would fall. Nothing he did could change that. It would all come down.

But there is a ray of hope which shines through Jesus' lament for Jerusalem. It is in his words "*on the third day I finish my work.*" He would indeed, with his own body, shield and protect the flock under his protective wings, as he was crucified on a Roman cross, just outside the walls of Jerusalem. His arms stretched wide, nailed to the cross, are the protective wings which save the whole world from sin and death. His vulnerability and willingness to give himself up in death for the sake of us all, to take on all the violence and humiliation that the Romans and his betrayers were able to dish out on him – this is the ultimate protection! For on the third day he would rise again from death, to life – the victory which gives us all life, through faith!

So, that is where this passage meets you and me today. We follow Jesus – the one who had the courage and the faith to do what God sent him to do: which is to proclaim the kingdom of God present with us – by healing people and feeding them in their suffering from sickness and hunger, preaching and teaching God's love for all people. He did so despite the challenges, the fear of death, the Herods of the world and the Pharisees who spoke like friends who care, yet tempted him to turn away from his mission.

Today, we have many things to fear in this world...you know what they are. For many it is the threat of disease or declining health as we age, and whether we will be protected or cared for. You may fear for your children as they grow up in a world that seems increasingly dangerous, if you listen to the media voices and politicians who want to scare you for your vote. Some have fear of immigrants, refugees and strangers – while others have fear of the police, the armed forces, or the government which is intended to provide protection. Some of the fears are irrational, set off by those who profit by public fear – but some fears are real. We know that for many women and children the fear of violence in their homes is real, that anxiety over being deported is real for many undocumented immigrants, and so is the fear of refugees who exist in border camps around the world, not knowing what is next, or where they will be safe.

What do you fear? Perhaps you have fears for your present or future health, or making a living - or for the future, and for your children and grandchildren. The future can seem very challenging to us in the church today. So what do we do with our fears, if we cannot rely on ourselves or other human beings to protect us?

Sometimes we have to turn to our faith. Although we are not Jesus, with the same identity, courage, and faith to withstand the threats of those with power to bully and threaten us, we are promised the gifts of the Spirit to strengthen us! We have been baptized in the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have received the gift of faith and the power of the Holy Spirit, when we open ourselves to receive them.

So we follow Jesus, and his example of seeking truth, healing the sick, comforting the afflicted, encouraging the fearful, and proclaiming the good news of God. We do the work of the Church: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing families through Project Home, seeking justice and freedom for prisoners through Isaiah, and addressing the anxiety of families over health by seeking earned paid sick leave for everyone who works in St. Paul, and in this state. There are many ways that we can be witnesses against fear by simply following what our faith calls us to do – with compassion for others, and a welcome to our neighbors. Sometimes it's not easy to do, and we might be questioned or even threatened for it.

But whenever you or I feel the fear that comes through feeling vulnerable to others, to threats or to challenges to our faith, we are invited by Jesus to place our hope and trust in God, who can encourage and strengthen us, even cast off our fears! In today's psalm, we hear the encouragement that faith in the Lord can give. It gives us words to name our fears, and to speak with hope and trust in God!

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?

When evildoers close in against me to devour my flesh,

They, my foes and my enemies will stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me, my heart will not fear.

Though war rise up against me, my trust will not be shaken...

For in the day of trouble God will give me shelter,

Hide me in the hidden places of the sanctuary, and raise me high up on a rock.

So whenever we are afraid, we are encouraged to pray to the Lord, and say:

Hide not your face from me, turn not away from your servant in anger.

Cast me not away – you have been my helper;

forsake me not, O God of my salvation.

Though my father and my mother forsake me, the Lord will take me in.

Teach me your way, O Lord; lead me on a level path, because of my oppressors.

Subject me not to the will of my foes,

For they rise up against me, false witnesses breathing violence.

This I believe – that I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living!

Wait for the Lord and be strong. Take heart and wait for the Lord! (Psalm 97)

So be strong, brothers and sisters! Keep the faith! And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

For the congregation of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Duluth, whose church was burned and destroyed last Thursday, that they will continue to be sustained by hope and be “the Church”. Protect us in our times of need, guide us and all congregations in the ELCA to help one another in challenging times, and work together to build and rebuild your Church. Hear us, O God.

For all our needs, and for all persons for whom we pray, silently or out loud.....
Hear us, O God.