

Luke 13:31-35

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.' He said to them, '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. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from 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! See, your house is left to you. And 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."'

Base Camp

"How I have desired to gather you together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings!" Just dwell on that image for a moment. That is the nature of God's love, a protective love that guards us, shields us from all that we would ever fear, and the source of all fear is our separation from God, our wander out from under the protection of that mother God who would gather us under her wings. Scripture describes humanity's first step away from God in the legend of the Garden of Eden where man and woman both lose their trust in God, which is the very essence of our wandering away from God. They were persuaded that God was withholding something from them, that if they ate of the fruit that they were denied that they would be more like God, which was not to say that they would be closer to God but rather that they would stand apart from God, that they would be God's unto themselves. And the result of that transgression was not just that they erected a wall between themselves and God; the result was also that they erected a wall between each other – we see the man blame the woman for his transgression, and you can be sure that the woman had a few choice words for her husband later that day ("What do you mean, it was my fault?). The generation that followed Adam and Eve witnessed our first murder as jealously consumed humanity, and we have only to go to a few generations past Cain until we find a man who can boast in his murdering of a person who strikes him – that is perhaps the most telling evidence of how we stand apart from God and from one another, that we can kill another human being, a creation of God, and show no remorse. This is how far humanity has strayed from those loving, protective wings of our mother God who would protect us from the destructive power of our own sin if we would simply remain under her wings.

But we were not willing. Jesus has come to announce the way is still open for us to come back into God's love and care if we choose to return. And we who claim of the name of Christ – we who are Christian – have indeed taken a step back to our loving God, back to the protection of those wings of mercy and grace, where we may experience that peace that transcends human understanding because humans understand themselves to be either apart from God or consider themselves to BE gods. We have chosen to return to the one true God and not to imagine ourselves to be something that we are not.

Which brings me to the question, why are you here this morning? And why do you keep coming here? As I look around I can imagine that there are dozens of reasons. For some of you this is where you feel a sense of family outside of your immediate family. Some of you come because this was the place that you experienced the grace of God for the first time and that experience connected you in such a way that you cannot imagine going to any other church. Some of you may have just started coming, but you feel comfortable; the pastor's messages are palatable and not too far outside your comfort zone. Some of you might like the music, or the coffee. And while you may have done a little theological research before deciding to come into a Methodist church, it was probably not theology that has kept you here as it is the people who are sitting on your left and your right, in front of and behind you. We have a pretty good thing going here with the love and the care and the support that we offer to one another, and we have ministries that you can feel good about supporting – like our children's ministry strives to bring up children with an appreciation for God's love and grace, like our feeding ministry and our ministry to the homeless which tend to the needs of the some of the most vulnerable people in our community. So there are lots of reasons you may come to Bethel and keep coming.

And I think that the most important reason you come may have to do with the fact that we make every effort to welcome everyone and to judge no one, to be like that hen that Jesus describes in this passage, the one who protects a brood of chicks under her wings; so too do we protect others under wings of love in this place we call church. It's kind of like base camp; when I was stationed in South Korea, base camp was where we all felt safe from the enemy, where we could relax, literally "let our guard down" knowing that we were protected by others who WERE on guard. The reason you come has very little to do with the "capital-C Church," the UNITED METHODIST CHURCH or the doctrines of the United Methodist Church. In fact our church and many others, in our endeavor to be a truly loving and welcoming church, actively oppose one of the doctrines of the United Methodist Church, the one that insists that homosexuality is not compatible with a Christian lifestyle; we just had a conference yesterday to see how churches in our "conference" should react to the decision made recently by the majority of delegates that I do believe represent the majority of members of the United Methodist Church, and we are committed to stand our ground because we believe that it is unjust to

discriminate against anyone based upon their God-given sexual orientation and gender identity. The point I'm making though is that religious institutions that were formed by good people for good reasons can run amuck on some very important issues. Institutions that claim to represent God on earth can fail to do God's will in important ways. And we must not be afraid of authorities in the church who fail to act on the authority of God.

That's where we find Jesus in today's scripture reading, being warned by fellow Jews that his ministry is upsetting the Jews who held the reins of power. Remember, Jesus was a Jew. The Pharisees were Jews. And King Herod, the person who wants to kill Jesus, is a Jew. John the Baptist, who was recently murdered by King Herod, was a Jew. So this conflict that we read about is a conflict within the Church so to speak. Now you might wonder why King Herod would be upset with Jesus for healing people and casting out demons, but the fact that he was doing all this healing showed that Jesus had authority over illnesses and over demons which a lot of folks believed were the causes of illnesses. And if Jesus had authority over demons he must be a true man of God *and that was a threat to the person and people who claimed to be God's representatives on earth, namely King Herod, the priests, and the rulers of the synagogues.* King Herod and the priests were supposed to be the true authorities, but their authority was being called into question in a rather stark way. Jesus was healing people who weren't being healed by the very people who were claiming to represent God, and it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that God was working through Jesus and not through people like King Herod and the chief priests. Jesus was causing a dangerous split in the church.

There was another problem with Jesus: King Herod and the chief priests were not so much serving the God of Israel so much as they were serving the god of Rome. Herod was king because Caesar had approved of him being king, and the chief priests kept their positions of privilege because Herod had approved of them being in charge of the Temple. Besides healing people, Jesus was traveling around Judea and Samaria and Galilee speaking about the coming of God's kingdom, and the God that Jesus was serving was a God who desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and the time of the corrupt rulers would soon be passing and a new age was at hand. And people were listening to Jesus. People were following Jesus. And it was only a matter of time before there would be a direct confrontation between Jesus and his followers on the one hand and Herod and the chief priests on the other. Herod and the priests believed that Jesus had to be disposed of.

There are two lessons I'd like you to take to heart this morning, both drawn from this passage, and both relevant to this season of Lent. First, watch out for religious pride. It's quite ironic that the Bible contains so much warning against the abuses of religious

authority, and yet the Bible has been used as a tool by religious authorities to harm others and to maintain their own power. The people who claim to be acting in accordance with God's will are often stuck in their way of thinking, and so comfortable in their way of thinking that when someone like Jesus says or does something counter to their way of thinking or acting they resist it, even label it evil. But their insistence on doing things their way just reflects a pride in their own traditions and customs, and behind their pride is a comfort in those traditions and customs because those traditions and customs usually keep them in positions of privilege and power. Do you think it's mainly men or women in the church who insist that a woman should not preach from the pulpit? Do you believe it's straight or gay folks who insist that homosexuality is incompatible with a Christian lifestyle? What was behind King Herod's desire to kill Jesus is the same thing that is behind the desire of some to marginalize and deprive others of the dignity they deserve: It's human pride.

The second lesson I would like you to glean from this scripture passage is to persist in righteousness. Jesus calls Herod a fox, which means something different in Hebrew than it does in English. Jesus is not saying that Herod is clever; he's saying that he is small, of little importance, not a king at all, and not an authority to be submit to. Jesus will go right ahead with his ministry of healing, with his ministry of mercy, with his ministry of God. He's not out to get Herod or the priests or those who want to get rid of him; he's just not letting them get in the way of God's ministry of mercy and justice, and we can't either. We can't let forces that would try to stand in the way of God's kingdom keep us from living out God's kingdom.

Here in this season of Lent we remember the love that God showed the world in Jesus Christ, a love that could not be thwarted by threats of violence or violence itself. A love that was unstoppable. A love that was indestructible. Let us love without fear. Let us love without restraint. Let us love as God loves us.