

Sermon on Sunday 16 March 2025

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Philippians 3. 17 – 4. 1 & Luke 13. 31-end

The Fox and the Hen

As gentle as a dove.
As quiet as a mouse.
As busy as a bee.
As sly as a ...? Fox.

Many of us will have grown up with folktales and fables involving a cunning fox, often trying to outwit an unsuspecting or even more cunning hen.

Both make an appearance in today's reading.

It begins with a group of religious leaders, the Pharisees, approaching Jesus with news of a death threat. Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great who had unsuccessfully tried to murder Jesus as an infant, is now, they say, out to do what his father failed to do.

Jesus' response, strangely, isn't to pack up and run for the hills, but instead to put further fuel to the fire by insulting Herod. He says, 'Go tell that "Fox" that it's business as usual'. Jesus will not be intimidated or drawn away from his true calling. Fearless or foolhardy? This is, after all, the Herod who months earlier had beheaded Jesus' cousin, John.

To call Herod a 'Fox' wasn't just to accuse him of duplicity or deceit. In Jewish purity culture, a fox was considered ritually unclean. So, Jesus is saying that this puppet king, who sits in the

pockets of the Roman occupation, is ritually unclean; soiled, corrupt.

Jesus was being defiantly provocative and political. He was speaking truth to power. And isn't that what religion is supposed to do? Scripture is full of prophets sent to challenge the tyrants of their day.

Now, popular etiquette would suggest that in polite society, one should never discuss politics or religion. If that's so, then Jesus wasn't polite. He talked unashamedly about both.

And the politics of his kingdom were diametrically opposed to the politics of the rulers of his day. Always, he was on the side of the powerless.

Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. And now, as then, we are witnessing how most humans aren't good with power. Usually, we use it for ourselves, rather than in the service of others.

Politics divorced from morality has dangerous consequences. And when branches of Christianity, for instance, endorse or collude with corrupt politics, they disgrace the name of Christ. And we can see that happening increasingly, both East and West.

I don't know about you, but the news every day fills me with sorrow and dread. Just when I think things can't get more cruel or sinister, they do. Since when did lies and bullying and climate denial and Nazi salutes become acceptable? My instinct is to turn away because I feel powerless and fearful. And, increasingly, my question to myself is, in these times, how do I pray?

Christ chose not to turn away but to turn his face towards the city that would destroy him, and to lament: 'How I've longed to gather you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings'.

So, our prayers must give voice and space to lament. Tears are often the deepest prayers. On behalf of those who suffer, we join with the Psalmist, and we say, 'How long, O Lord, how long?'.

Time after time in scripture we are presented with the words, 'Do not fear', which is so much easier said than done in a world full of foxes. So, we look to the example of the one who, like a hen, longs to gather her chicks under her wings.

And in prayer we can picture our Mother Hen of a God sheltering the powerless, and we can pray for the protection of their mind, their body, their spirit. And if at any time we are given the opportunity to stand up for the outsider or the powerless, then we put our prayer into action, and we stand with them and we speak truth to power.

Commenting on this passage, Nadia Bolz-Weber says: 'Faith in God does not bring you safety. The fox still exists. Danger still exists. And by that, I mean, danger is not optional, but *fear* is.'

She goes on to say: 'Because maybe the opposite of fear isn't bravery. Maybe the opposite of fear is love. Paul tells us that perfect love casts out fear. So, in the response to our own Herods, in response to the very real dangers of this world, we have an invitation as people of faith: which is to respond by loving.'

We are called to love the Herods of this world. That challenges me to the core.

You see, the Herods of this world also belong beneath the wings of the Mother Hen God. And there, I pray they will be transformed by love and mercy.

Anne Lamott, in her book 'Hallelujah Anyway', writes that 'Mercy is radical kindness. Mercy means offering or being offered aid in desperate straits. Mercy is not deserved. It involves absolving the unabsolvable, forgiving the unforgivable

So then, in the face of tyranny, how do we pray?

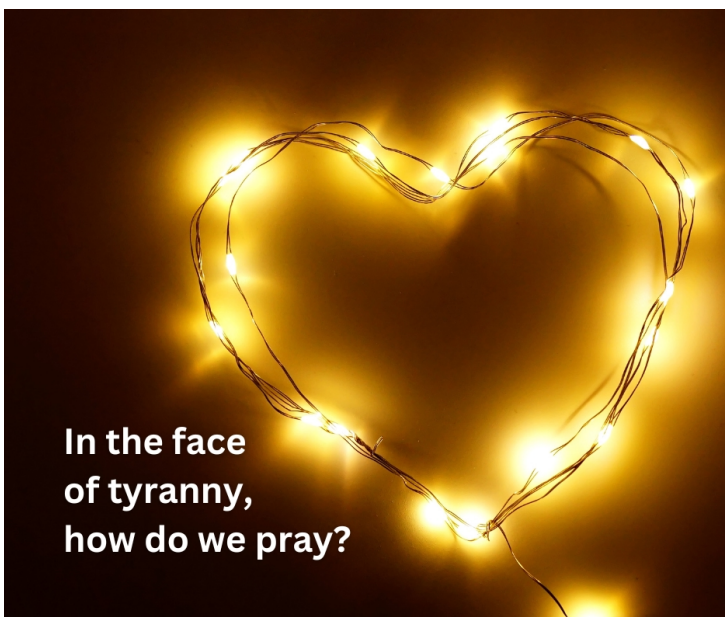
We defiantly turn towards evil holding the certain hope that goodness always is stronger.

We lament with and for the powerless, and we pray that they would know the protection of the wings of their God.

We offer ourselves to God as advocates of truth, mercy and justice.

And we pray to love our tyrants with a love that changes both me and maybe them; a perfect love that casts out fear.

Let me end with some words from Loryn Brantz: 'In a world of hate, love is an act of resistance. In a time of fear, faith is an act of resistance. In a time of misinformation, education is an act of resistance. In a time of poor leadership, community is an act of resistance. Resist. Resist. Resist.' Amen



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