

The Second Sunday in Lent, Year C
The Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
March 13, 2022
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
Psalm 27
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 13:31-35

Fox in the Henhouse

Have you ever encountered something in a story that you really want to interpret in a particular way because it would put a new twist on an old saying or offer a really great punchline?

That's been my situation preparing for today. As many of you know already, I'm a farm girl, a seventh-generation native of Henry County, Georgia. I come from generations of farmers. My parents spoke a language of land and weather and agriculture from a pre-mechanized era, a language they taught to me. And although it's faded out in lots of places, I'm still fluent in it.

So, in a passage like today's gospel when Jesus calls Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee, a fox and a few verses later opines that he would love to gather all of Jerusalem under his wings like a mama hen, can you guess where my mind goes? Fox, hen, chicks: lickety split I think, "Fox in the henhouse." Bad situation. To be avoided. But if arising, to be curtailed efficiently. Protect the vulnerable from the predator.

And we could definitely spin this passage in that direction: Herod as villain is not a hard sell. His legacy is pretty awful. He certainly didn't mind killing folks to accomplish his own agenda or assuage his own ego. He issued an edict that all male children under the age of two should be killed when the magi visited and told him that they were seeking the newborn king of the Jews. He had Jesus' cousin John the Baptizer decapitated because Herod foolishly promised his stepdaughter anything she wanted and was afraid to look bad in front of his party guests by not keeping his promise.

But when Jesus calls Herod a fox in our gospel today, he isn't drawing on the more common connotations of *fox* for us in English and for speakers of other languages. He isn't calling Herod a predator. And he isn't calling him wise or clever. He's using *fox* in a way found elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures and in the Talmud, the Jewish commentary on them. In this usage, a person of power or great stature

or wisdom is referred to as a lion. And a person of cowardice or self-absorption or foolishness is referred to as a fox.

Basically, Jesus is calling Herod out by calling him a fox. Interpreted through this more Hebraic lens, we see Jesus emerging in an active way as the Lion of Judah that he is. He is focused on his work: casting out demons, healing folks of all kinds of diseases, and continuing his journey to Jerusalem, unafraid of what may befall him there.

Interpreted this way, we see that the Pharisees, who have criticized Jesus and picked fights with him along the way, are making another run at him in this passage. It's the Pharisees who have asked him previously by what authority he casts out demons. It's the Pharisees who have strenuously objected to him performing healings on the sabbath day.

And in today's gospel, it's the Pharisees who come to Jesus saying he should steer clear of Jerusalem because Herod wants to kill him. Perhaps this is the last strategy they can think of. Since Jesus isn't worried about what they think of him, maybe they can keep him out of Jerusalem at Passover time by invoking Herod as the civil authority bent on his destruction.

This attempt doesn't work either. Jesus is clear on his work, his calling, his purpose. He is undeterred by nanny-nanny-boo-boo sideways and toothless warnings. He already knows Herod wants to kill him; he has wanted to since Jesus was a baby. And Herod is the one who is fearful, not Jesus. Jesus knows who he is and what he is called to do.

Perhaps we see in this passage a foreshadowing. The Pharisees, who are among the most devout of observant Jews in the first century, will be willing to make common cause with Herod, whom they have previously criticized for his lack of devotion to the Jewish tradition and even his flouting of it. They will join with Herod in order to shut Jesus down.

Just before today's gospel, Jesus has been teaching publicly in Jerusalem and near Jerusalem and saying that people will come from north and south and east and west to God's great banquet. He has been saying that many who are first now will be last, and many who are currently last will be first in God's inbreaking realm.

This is good news for the majority of the folks in Palestine and the majority of those listening to Jesus, but it is bad news for the Pharisees and for Herod. What do

the Pharisees and Herod have in common? A desire to protect the established order. Herod is the civil authority, and the Pharisees are among the religious authorities. Both are eager to derail, deter, and even kill innovation and new ideas in the tradition. Both Herod and the Pharisees are fearful, anxious, eager to stifle newness, including new takes on ancient texts and truths.

Jesus isn't afraid to move into the future. Even though he doesn't at this point know everything that will go down, he is willing to live into something new. He knows that prophets get killed in Jerusalem. He probably has at least some inkling that he may share the fate of the prophets of old. Still, he is undeterred. He will cast out demons and heal the sick and go on to Jerusalem.

And then the passage turns. And we see that Jesus who is purposeful and passionate is also *compassionate*. Even though he is aware he will likely be killed in Jerusalem by the establishment, he loves Jerusalem; he loves particularly the people of Jerusalem. He longs to gather all of them, even Herod and the Pharisees—even all of us—under the shelter of his wings.

Herod is a cowardly fox. The Pharisees are like Chicken Little telling Jesus to run away before the sky falls on him. Jesus is a fiercely loving and protective mama hen with the heart of a lion. Mama hens are clear on their purpose and their work: they do their best to get all their children safely across every street. They care for them with everything they have.

You might have seen a mama hen and her chicks already this morning here in Key West. Animal predators and cars and scooters and bicycles and giant humans with our giant feet: all of these are threats to baby chicks as well as insufficient food and water. It's impossible for chicks to grow to adulthood without learning survival skills on their own. And yet, even when they are fairly good-sized, fairly well grown, they can be sheltered under their mother's wings.

Jesus is purposeful, passionate, and compassionate. He is merciful to those who need mercy.

Mercy echoes through today's readings and in the collect of the day.

Today's collect invokes our God "whose glory it is always to have mercy."

In the reading from Genesis, God has mercy on Abraham who is understandably worried about his line dying out. God shows mercy to Abraham by assuring him

that his descendants will be as stars in the sky and that God has the power to deliver him and his descendants into the promised land.

The psalm in verse 10 asks God to hear us when we call and have mercy on us and answer us.

The reading from Philippians indicates that God's mercy will cause every humiliation we have suffered to be transformed into and conformed to the body of Christ's glory.

Mercy echoes through today's readings. What is it?

Mercy. *Hesed* in Hebrew. Lovingkindness is the best translation of it into English, according to many Hebrew scholars.

As you and I as individuals and we as a congregation and community continue to discern what to let go, what to take up, let's not forget to have mercy on one another and ourselves and the world around us. Have mercy.

The author Cathleen Falsani says,

“Justice is getting what you deserve.

Mercy is not getting what you deserve.

And grace is getting what you absolutely don't deserve.

..... benign good will. unprovoked compassion. the unearnable gift.”

We rely on God for God's grace giving us those things which we don't deserve but which we desperately need nonetheless. And we can give grace in our way by doing things for others, even when they “don't deserve them,” as if we do. And we can give one another space and room to make mistakes and try again by showing one another mercy.

Don't respond with that smart comment that popped into your head. Don't say everything that we think. As Will Rogers would tell us, we should “never miss a good chance to shut up.” Give mercy. Show mercy. Practice lovingkindness as we move through this Lenten journey of discernment.

And, to paraphrase singer-songwriter Mary Gauthier, can you think of anyone on this planet right now who doesn't need a little mercy?

All the members of our own families, especially the most irascible ones.

All the members of our Church, including all the leadership and all the people and of all 111 dioceses of the Episcopal Church.

Our country, including all those who are entrusted with decisions at every level of government.

Every living thing, people everywhere, especially those living in the midst of war and rumors of war.

Every single one of us; not because we deserve it but because we need this mercy, this lovingkindness anyhow.

It puts me in the mind of Micah 6:8: “Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with your God.”

Do what is right. Practice lovingkindness. Walk closely and humbly with God.

We could all use a little mercy now.

Thank God, God gives it. Thank God, God empowers us to give it as well.

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“Mercy Now” by Mary Gauthier

My father could use a little mercy now
The fruits of his labor
Fall and rot slowly on the ground
His work is almost over
It won't be long and he won't be around
I love my father, and he could use some mercy now

My brother could use a little mercy now
He's a stranger to freedom
He's shackled to his fears and doubts
The pain that he lives in is
Almost more than living will allow
I love my brother, and he could use some mercy now

My Church and my Country could use a little mercy now
As they sink into a poisoned pit
That's going to take forever to climb out
They carry the weight of the faithful
Who follow 'em down
I love my Church and Country and they could use some mercy now

Every living thing could use a little mercy now
Only the hand of grace can end the race
Towards another mushroom cloud
People in power, well
They'll do anything to keep their crown
I love life, and life itself could use some mercy now

Yea, we all could use a little mercy now
I know we don't deserve it
But we need it anyhow
We hang in the balance
Dangle 'tween hell and hallowed ground
Every single one of us could use some mercy now
Every single one of us could use some mercy now
Every single one of us could use some mercy now