



Grace Lutheran
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SERMONS



LENT 2C SERMON

TEXT: Luke 13:31-35

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+13%3A+31-35&version=NRSV>

“The Fox and the Hen”

by Pastor Jim Hill

“Reversal of fortune” has been the plot of many books and movies. These are stories of victims who eventually become the victors, and bullies who eventually get their comeuppance and underdogs who go against the top dogs and end up winning.


This type of story is also common in children’s literature. For instance, there’s the fable of the Tortoise and the Hare. You may remember cartoons from decades ago, such as the Road Runner versus Wile E. Coyote, and Tweedy bird versus Sylvester the cat. These are satisfying stories where the hero, who is small or weak, or vulnerable, ends up conquering or outwitting the large, mean, powerful animal.

These stories are a reflection of our Judeo-Christian values. In the New Testament, for instance, after the angel Gabriel’s birth announcement to a young maiden named Mary, she sang an ancient song of faith: “[God] has ... scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. ... brought down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; ...[God] has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” When such reversals happen in our own lives, we should recognize them as the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise that “the last will be first and the first last”.

In the last few weeks, the whole world has been watching as the ruthless bully Vladimir Putin tries to take over the Ukraine. We’re all hoping and praying that Putin and Russian forces will fail, and the underdogs led by Zelensky will be victorious.

In today’s Psalm, # 27, the psalmist sings, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? . . . When evildoers assail me. . . they shall stumble and fall. Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.”

This sounds like something Jesus would say! The story of Jesus of Nazareth is the ultimate “reversal story”. The Christian church celebrates this story every year, as we go through the Sundays and seasons of the church Year. I composed a very simple song about this, which we haven’t sung for a number of years. It goes up and down the major scale:

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1. Advent tells us Christ is near,
Christmas tells us Christ is here;
In Epiphany we trace
Truth and light from Jesus' face.

2. Then Ash Wednesday starts our Lent:

Forty days his life is spent,
Suffering, Christ died for us
On Good Friday, as he must.

3. Holy Week and Easter, then,
Tell who died and rose again;
Oh, that happy Easter Day!
"Christ is ris'n indeed," we say.

4. Easter season's forty days,
Time to celebrate and praise;
Then our Lord ascends on high
Where we'll follow when we die.

5. Yet we're not alone or lost,
God returned at Pentecost,
Fifty days from Easter's flame
God the Holy Spirit came!

6. For the next six months we learn,
How to wait for Christ's return,
How his church must act and live,
Make disciples, learn to give.

Right now we are in the six weeks of Lent, as we follow Jesus on his down-hill road to death on the cross. Of course, the Big Reversal will come on Easter Sunday, with Jesus' glorious resurrection.

In today's Gospel Lesson, we see the conflict shaping up between two antagonists that Jesus characterizes as a fox and a hen. The fox is the powerful and ruthless King Herod, and the hen is Jesus himself.

A fox is wily and deceitful, using strategies and power plays to control his prey and get his way. I'm sure you've heard the expression: "Never leave a fox to guard the henhouse". The chickens end up being eaten.

In one story I heard, there's only one hen in the henhouse, which the fox is determined to kill. He finds a sack and runs with it, in circles around the hen house, until the hen gets dizzy watching him. When the hen faints and falls to the ground, the fox right away throws the hen into the sack. However, the hen revives and when the fox isn't looking, she gets out of the sack replaces her body weight with a rock, and the fox ends up taking home something worthless. The point, of course, is that clever foxes sometimes get out-foxed.

In any society, including the society of Jesus' day, there are always wily and devious types of people who want to control and manipulate and use others for personal advantage. They want to exalt their own power, prestige or position, no matter whom it hurts.

Some of the Pharisees were like this, as they plotted to do away with Jesus, because he was undermining their power and position, and their livelihood. The Pharisees in today's text, who approached Jesus and warned him to run away, may have been genuinely concerned for his welfare; but I wonder about that. Because, if Jesus had heeded their warning and fled, that would perhaps have been a kind of victory for the Pharisees, for Jesus would have stayed away from Jerusalem, out in the boonies, where he wouldn't have done so much "harm".

But today's Scripture tells us that Jesus was adamant. He was determined to continue his work and go right into Jerusalem. And he says sarcastically, "It is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside Jerusalem!" (vs. 33). So Jesus heads straight into the capital city, the centre of power. He tells "truth to power" and take the consequences.

Some of the foxes and tyrants of our time are easy to identify, like Putin of Russia and Kim Jong-un of North Korea. But we have to be careful, because sometimes the very people who accuse leaders of evil, have an agenda to advance their own leadership and advance their own power and control. It happens even in churches, as some of you know from experience.

Herod's foxiness was not obvious to the people of his time, and I think present-day foxes are not always obvious to us. There are a lot of people who seem to be seeking the best interests of others, but in many cases they are driven by the old me-first motive. For such people, life is a game of winners and losers, of competition to get to "the top" and have everyone else "under" them. Martin Luther put it this way: "Everyone wants to be another person's god." Luther had a very dim view of human nature!

Luther wanted to emphasize the Scriptural truth that none of us is without condemnation, that we are all sinners and fall short of the glory of God. Someone once told me, when you point the finger at someone, three of your fingers are pointing back at yourself. So instead of condemning others, we should examine ourselves and find out where we need confession and repentance.

Jesus, however, was a special case. Jesus was the only truly righteous individual who ever lived. As the Son of God, he knew exactly what was going on in the conniving heart of King Herod. So he doesn't mince words. He points his finger at Herod and calls him the fox that he really is.

But notice in today's text, that Jesus' tone suddenly changes from anger to mournful lamentation! Jesus is the hen in this story, and squawks: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not!" Jesus is speaking

here as God's Representative here on earth – not just an angel, but God incarnate.

Finally Jesus says: "See. Your house is left to you." As if to say: "It's your funeral. Sadly, you will take the consequences for your evil." But then Jesus says, "After you get rid of me, I'll be coming back. Then you'll welcome me as Lord and King. Then you'll exclaim: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

The point here is that nothing would stop Jesus —no fox, no lion, no eagle, no Pharisee, no king, no power on earth was going to be able to stop Jesus from doing what he came into the world to do:

to love us to death;

to suffer and die to atone for our sins;

to become the sacrificial Lamb which takes our sin away.

Jesus is the only way by which we can attain true righteousness and goodness.
Because it's a gift of God.

King Herod had a brilliant and flashy career, but that fox was ignominiously brought down from his throne, whereas Jesus, the vulnerable hen, was "given the name which is above every name [as St. Paul put it], and one day every knee will bend before him, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord".

It's amazing and wonderful, that, of all the animals that Jesus might have compared himself to, he chose the hen! A mother hen gathering her brood under her wings is a feminine image. Yet it's also an image of boldness and bravery. She's willing to do anything to protect her children, even die for them.

How blessed we are, to have such a Saviour!

May his love and compassion be our strength.

Amen.

~ Pastor Jim Hill