

“The Hen and the Fox”

I lived close to both sets of grandparents as a child. They lived on farms. When my parents were young, they kept a variety of animals, including cows, pigs, chickens, and geese. By the time my siblings and I were born, my grandparents only had chickens, geese, and guinea fowl.

Before there was a free-range label, these birds were living the life. I had no idea that my grandparents were *avantgarde* in animal husbandry. I am sure that they did not. But a wise keeper of fowl knows better than to allow them to run free at night. There are varmints that would be happy to get their teeth into a plump chicken, a fat goose, or an unsuspecting guinea hen. Thus, it is *de rigueur* to keep them in pens at night. These birds were enclosed by a high chicken wire fence. Inside the pen was a coop for them to nest in and a tree for them to roost in.

The need to keep domestic fowl safe from critters is the subject of numerous stories and fables. If you go online, you can find many versions of Aesop fables about a chicken and a fox. In each of the fables, the fox tries to coax the chicken into coming down from a perch to be vulnerable to the fox. Foxes are considered cunning, while chickens are considered dull-witted, but in the fables, it is the chicken who always outwits the fox. In each of the fables, the fox's cleverness, flattery, and cunning do not lead to catching the hen. She knows the fox's intention and stays far enough away to keep him tantalized but not dangerous to her. In some of the fables, the chicken even outfoxes the fox, and the fox ends up trapped by dogs or a farmer.

A fox and a hen show up in today's Gospel reading from Luke. The fox is Herod Antipas, according to Jesus. This Herod is a son of Herod the Great. Herod the Great was the one who expanded the Second Temple in Jerusalem. He is also the one who is identified in Matthew's Gospel as the king the Magi encounter when they are looking for the child Jesus. He is also the one who ordered the slaughter of the innocents.

Besides being cruel, Herod was also vain. We can tell because he named three of his four sons Herod—Herod Archelaus, Herod Phillip, and Herod Antipas. The latter is the one we are dealing with in today's Gospel.

This Herod who, having been tantalized by the dancing of his stepdaughter Salome and conned by his wife Herodias, had John the Baptist killed. He later plays a role in the interrogation of Jesus before his crucifixion.

In today's scripture, the Pharisees, who are normally Jesus' antagonists, warn him that Herod is out to kill him. I wonder if Herod was concerned that people were saying that Jesus was John the Baptizer raised from the dead.¹ Perhaps Jesus' preaching and healing were disrupting the normal calm of the

¹ Luke 9:7

populous. I also wonder if the threat was real or if it was a scheme by the Pharisees to derail Jesus' ministry. If he goes into hiding, his fame and popularity might diminish.

Regardless of the cause, Jesus will not be diverted. Luke makes Jesus' intentions clear when he states earlier in the gospel that "Jesus had set his face to go to Jerusalem."² Jesus knows that his ministry will reach its apex in Jerusalem. He is determined not to be thwarted.

Jesus responds to the Pharisees' warning about Herod by calling him a fox. It is not intended as a compliment. The fox may be sly and cunning, but Jesus claims that Herod can do nothing to him outside of Jerusalem. Nothing and no one can touch him before he reaches Jerusalem. What is more, he has work to do: healing and casting out demons.

However, the reference to Jerusalem changes Jesus' defiance into a lament. He says, "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!"³ Unlike the hens in Aesop's fables, Jesus compares himself to a hen protecting her chicks. He longs to shelter the people of Jerusalem the way a hen shelters her brood under her wings. Jesus is the metaphorical mother of those he cares for. The hen protects her young with her body, just as Jesus will protect us with his body on the cross.

The rulers of this world, exemplified by Herod Antipas, have their powers, but Jesus has no regard for them. He dismisses them with an epithet because his salvific work is more important than puffing up fragile egos. The fox, whatever his objectives, will not interfere with his holy work.

Jesus puts his body in the way of evil to protect all of us. That is what he does when he is sacrificed by the Empire and the Temple authorities on the cross. As our risen savior, he continues to put his body between us and the evil of the world. He protects us like a mother hen, but we must allow ourselves to be collected around him.

We are invited each day to be gathered under the protection of the Son of Man. It is our choice. We can come to him freely or resist as those in Jerusalem did two thousand years ago. Many people over the centuries have turned to the sly and cunning of this world, trusting in bravado and bluster while resisting God. Many have scoffed that the way of the cross is weak, pathetic, and the sanctuary of fools. We have a choice. We can do as Joshua did when he said, "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."⁴ Or we can put our trust in the wily and cunning powers of the world. May we choose wisely.

² Luke 9:51, 53

³ Luke 13:34-35 NRSV

⁴ Joshua 24:15b KJV