



A Fox, a Hen, and a Cross **Philippians 3:17--4:1; Luke 13:31-35** **Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (March 13, 2022)**

Foxes get a bad rep! They're known as sneaky liars and always end up on the losing side in morality fables told to children.¹

They are actually one of nature's smartest animals. Foxes are extremely caring parents and while they might be most closely related to dogs or coyotes, foxes are much more like cats. For instance, foxes are almost entirely solitary, like a cat. For the most part, foxes try to avoid running into other foxes. But most foxes live with other foxes in their own family. While a family of foxes is called a "skulk," you're still much more likely to see a lone fox hunting than an entire group, like you would with canines.

Some foxes, like the grey fox, can even retract their claws like cats. Perhaps their most cat-like trait, though, are their vertical pupils, which help them see better at night when they hunt.

Another way foxes are like cats? They have whiskers, and not just on their faces! Foxes also have whiskers on their tails that help them with directions.

Did you know that red foxes can reportedly hear a watch ticking from 40 miles away? So, if you see a fox in your backyard, don't even waste your time attempting to sneak up on him.²

(On a lighter note, would you know why the foxes might be hunting rabbits? Because they might be in the mood for fast food.)

In today's gospel, Jesus calls Herod Antipas a fox after hearing from some Pharisees that the king wants to kill him. It's not easy to understand the Pharisees' motivation in warning Jesus.

Pharisees are often juxtaposed against Jesus and his work. In some places they are presented as clearly hostile or trying to trap Jesus and he pronounces woes against them (Luke 5: 30; 6:7; 11:42-44), but on other occasions (7:36; 14:1) their offering of table hospitality implies a more positive attitude; and in Acts (15:5) Luke reports that some Pharisees convert to Christianity.

So, is this a friendly warning prompted by concern for his wellbeing or an attempt to disrupt his activities for some reason? On the one hand, when they suggest to Jesus that Herod desires to kill him, their claim could read as a trick to scare Jesus out of town. On the other hand, even though Herod is curious about this miracle worker, he has no problem imprisoning and executing outspoken prophets like John the Baptist (Luke 3:19,20; 9:7-9).

¹ See for instance [Aesop's Fables that Reference Foxes \(aesopsfables.org\)](http://aesopsfables.org) and [Welcome to La Fontaine's fables page! \(worldoftales.com\)](http://worldoftales.com)

² [12+ Fantastic Fox Facts For True Fanatics \(scarymommy.com\)](http://scarymommy.com)

So, is it information, misinformation, or manipulation that they are engaged in?

News broadcasts are always tainted by a certain ideological perspective, no matter how neutral they want to be and say they are. A good practice is to expose oneself to multiple news outlets and then form one's own opinion keeping in mind that one's opinion is still a product of one's upbringing, worldview, and political leaning.

Manipulation happens when one is exposed to just one way of seeing reality and when all other sources of information are silenced. This surely happens in authoritarian regimes as it may happen by choice even in a democratic country where people choose to listen to limited (allegedly) information sources reflecting one's own ideological sphere. This is when lies become the tool of choice to confuse the conversation, to spread misinformation, and to control the outcome. Obviously, this behavior hampers communication, understanding, and trust. This is when people stop talking *with* each other and start shouting (if not shooting) *at* each other.

Regardless of the trustworthiness of the Pharisees, Jesus sends them back with a message: "tell that fox that I answer to a higher authority." Foxes in both Greek and rabbinic literature were depicted as crafty, sinister creatures. This is no compliment to Herod. Jesus refuses to be turned from the cause he is committed to and the course he intends to pursue to bring it about.

Jesus' response covers two distinct dimensions – he will not be scared off by a threat of present danger from what he is doing *here and now* in Galilee, and he will not be deterred by the threat of *future* danger from continuing on to Jerusalem to do what he intends to do there.

Prophets have been threatened with death, and indeed have died, in Jerusalem before (Jeremiah 26: 7–11, 20–23; Lk 11:47–50; Mt 23: 29–30). In fact, examples of prophetic confrontations with power from Israel's history abound: Samuel rejecting Saul (1 Sam 15); Nathan rebuking David (2 Sam 12); Elijah challenging Ahab (1 Kings 21).

The prophet's job is to tell hard truths we do not want to hear. The prophet will not receive applause and acclaim. The opposite is true: the prophet will be denied and at best ignored; at worst maligned and persecuted. Prophecy is a job not for the comfortable but for the afflicted, not a calling for the certain but for those burdened by the suffering of their communities.

But it isn't just the powerful who are the objects of the prophets' criticism. Prophets also name our acts of injustice, and we push back because we don't want to hear them. We raise our defense mechanism and reject their words as untrue and inflammatory. We counterattack, point a finger at others, and seek ways to justify ourselves missing the opportunity to take responsibility and grow. But as it turns out, such violent rejections do not get the last word. Truth always prevails even as it may be muffled in the short run. We should be lucky to acknowledge quickly that their words are not condemnation, but the reconciliation God offers, God's yearning that we would return to God's embrace.

In the Gospels, getting Herod's attention is not exactly desirable. Herod the Great, murderous and paranoid (see how he reacts at the announcement by the Magi of the newborn King and the killing of the innocent martyrs in Matthew 2), is long dead. We're dealing now with Herod Antipas, his son, who has failed to earn the respect of his subjects and possibly of Rome. Eager for power, he married Herodias, a Maccabean heiress. But she was already married to his brother Philip. John the Baptist was openly critical of his adulterous and unlawful matrimony, and Antipas eliminated him and then went (logically) after Jesus, whose message echoed John's, and

who was drawing to himself members of Herod Antipas's court (like the wife of Chuza, Herod's treasurer living in the palace (see Luke 8). Hoping to impress Rome's new emperor Tiberius, he constructed a new capital city, Tiberias, named for the emperor. But he built it on an old Jewish cemetery, probably incurring into the people's disapproval: unclean!

Jesus knows that he will incur death if he goes to Jerusalem (9: 21–3). Nevertheless, this is what he has 'set his face' to do (Luke 9:51) and he will not stop until "it's finished" (Jn 19:30).³ Christian historian, Diana Butler Bass, reminds us that "Jesus lived, breathed, and embodied a boundary-subverting inclusion...Nothing is excluded except excluding."⁴ This is hard to take in. His table fellowship, calling one and all around the table of communion and friendship with God and one another, prefigured the great wedding party to which we will all one day participate (Matthew 22:1-46; Revelation 19:9).

Jesus remembers that the devil had left him in the desert with the intention to return at an opportune time and try again to distract and dissuade him from his mission. In the desert, Jesus' identity, loyalty, and mission were questioned and threatened. He is aware and lets his followers know that staying the course is surely going to take him and them into a head collision with the powers of evil which will eventually inflict the pain of death (Luke 9:21-26.44-45; 18:31-34). Jesus has had a taste of that strong reaction when he first announced his message in his hometown and his own people were ready to push him over the cliff (Luke 4:28-30).

But again and again, Jesus' prayer life has sustained his resolve to seek the Kingdom above all. Such is his "desire:" to be found faithful to the will of God and honor his calling. He counts on the providential assistance of the Father who will give him and those who ask all that they need (Psalm 37:4; Luke 11:1-13; 18:1-8).

His desire for the wellbeing of Jerusalem and all of Israel will require his sacrifice. On one hand, Jesus recognizes the evil that Jerusalem has inflicted on past prophets. Jerusalem does not desire what he desires. One doesn't have to be a parent to mourn missed opportunities, broken promises, or crushed hopes. All of us, regardless of our circumstances, know what it feels like to have our advice rejected. We know what it looks like to fail in our best efforts to protect those we love. We know the grief we experience when we watch someone we care about self-destruct before our very eyes.

On the other hand, he is not calling for the destruction of Jerusalem. Certainly, not everyone in Jerusalem and not all Jews were opposed to Jesus and his message. Hence, there would be some that would eventually exclaim the words from Psalm 118:26 "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." Jesus is not talking of all the Jews as in a block. He is generalizing for sure, but he is not that blind. He is deeply lamenting the historical record of those who strove to eradicate the prophetic voice that critiqued their power and challenged their authority. He has in mind those who, in their self-righteousness and unwillingness to see, lack openness to the vision and ways of God.⁵

³ Jesus' finished work on the cross was the beginning of new life for all who were once "dead in trespasses and sins" but who are now made "alive with Christ" (Ephesians 2:1, 5).

⁴ [A Movement of Inclusion — Center for Action and Contemplation \(cac.org\)](http://cac.org)

⁵ The Torah assigns the lethal sentence of stoning to various crimes. Most relevant for today's gospel are the charges of blasphemy (Leviticus 24:14, 16, 23) and apostasy (Leviticus 20:2; Deuteronomy 13:11). The leaders in Jerusalem charge those sent by God with disrespecting God and disavowing the covenant.

He is experiencing grief, but he will not retreat in the face of the people's stubbornness and opposition. For the sake of the city, he must pursue a course that will eventually bring him to the cross. He accepts that outcome for himself and cannot prevent it for his followers: how can a disciple save his or her life apart from Jesus and his way?

But he expresses his sorrow: "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!" (v. 34)

Jesus introduces a feminine image for God: A hen gathering her chicks under her wings. Can you stay with that picture? Can you see what Jesus is describing? Our God, a mother hen? A mother hen whose chicks reject *her*. It's hard enough not to think of God as a male and father. After all, this is the gender we have heard when describing God all our life. We are used to it. We have absorbed that image as a realistic description of what God looks like. But if we are shocked, it is only because we have limited our understanding of who God is. We have painted that image in our mind and are stuck on it. But it would better serve us if we learned to pay attention to the many other female metaphors in the Bible to describe God's power, acumen, or meaningful interaction with people.

Take for instance the following images: God as enraged she-bear (Hosea 13:8); God as soaring mother eagle (Deuteronomy 32:11-12); God as laboring woman (Isaiah 42:14); God as mom of a healthy, happy toddler (Psalm 131:2); God as skilled midwife (Psalm 22:9-10).

And, on this second Sunday in Lent, Luke's gospel invites us to contemplate Jesus as a mother hen whose chicks don't want her. Though she stands with her wings wide open, offering welcome, belonging, and shelter, her children refuse to come home to her. Her wings - her arms - are empty. This, in other words, is a mother bereft; a mother in mourning and struggling with failure and futility.⁶

Jesus calls Herod a fox. But we need not to be fooled: a fox can be dangerous. While in the world, believers are not necessarily immune from harm. On the contrary, we run into it. A hen is there ready to protect her chicks, but not all will survive the danger. Those who don't make it have chosen not to take shelter. But even those who are covered by the hen's wings are under physical and emotional threat.

Jesus' plan isn't about the comfort or safety of his people *in this world*. The Kingdom is not for the faint of heart. It's risky, dangerous, painful, costly. As we renounce to self-serving interests, as we surrender to the way of Christ, as we deny our life and bear our cross we give up the pleasure, comfort, and security that the world offers, to embrace the pleasure of knowing Jesus and be known by him; we cuddle the comfort that God's promises offer; and we rest safe and secure in his arms. At the same time, this kind of prophetic life is disturbing to the world, and we may feel the full force of the world's rejection.

Jesus, the mother hen, spreads his wings wide open, with his heart exposed, ready to offer shade and shelter for all his children, even the ones who want to stone and kill him.

The image of chicks snuggling under a mother hen's wings is an image of gathering, of community, of intentional oneness. It requires a return, a surrender.

⁶ I am indebted to Debbie Thomas for this visual.

What in us is “not willing” to be gathered this Lent?

Maybe, a powerful Father God may give us assurance, a sense of firmness and power. And yet, today Jesus suggests that a yearning mother hen is the God we belong to. She’s the one weeping for us and calling us home. And the home she’s calling us to is profoundly communal. The reach of her wings is wide. The hospitality of her shelter is vast. Her body and her heart are on the line, and yet her desire is fixed on us. On all of us.

May the longing of Jesus become our longing, too. May the way of the mother hen - the way of vulnerability, sorrow, hope, and readiness to welcome - lead us home. Amen.