

## Fox in the Henhouse

Luke 13:31-35

You may have heard of Aesop's fables in school, and you may have read one or two of them. Written by a Greek slave who lived in the 6th century BCE on the island of Samos, the fables taught valuable lessons about desirable moral and social behavior.

Likewise, the ancient Jewish faith highly valued parables, moral behavior, and laws concerning how to live well personally, in harmony with God, and in community with others. Judaism continues to cherish ethical behavior and encourages an action-oriented commitment to God and neighbor.

In the first century when Jesus lived, Greek was the language of the "modern" world. Jewish people, although deeply steeped in their Jewish faith, remained surrounded by Greek culture and its rich intellectual, philosophical, and literary traditions.

Often, we make the mistake of seeing Jesus and his contemporaries as though living in an isolated glass bubble, free from cultural influences other than their own. But as we know from our own time and place, this is not only doubtful but unreasonable. We all live and breathe in a world filled with various cultural influences. We have been influenced by different cultures and cultural experiences.

It was no different in Jesus' time. Jesus spent most of his early ministry on the shores and in the ports along the Via Maris –the greatest trade route of the time. He spent a lot of time in the port city of Capernaum. He traveled widely throughout the entire region including in non-Jewish territories, like Syre and Sidon. He conversed with Roman soldiers and even hung out with Samaritans. His early years were spent in Egypt, most likely near Alexandria, one of the greatest intellectual and cosmopolitan areas in the world.

Most 1st century people knew about Greek medicine, science, mathematics, astronomy, and literature. They had heard Greek works of literature as stories, legends, poetry, and fables. They knew about Plato, Aristotle, and Aesop. And whether intended or not, some of these literary devices and cultural metaphors of the time also influenced their own stories, parables, and wisdom. Likewise, many Greeks were interested and curious about the Jewish faith, as we see several times in scripture.

Let's look for the moment at Aesop's fable of the Fox and the Hen. In the story, a fox sneaks into the hen house, in which a hen is sitting just out of reach. The fox tries to cajole the hen to come down, but the hen wisely declines, seeing through the fox's sly maneuverings. Sometimes, under the guise of flattery or care, a manipulative person may take advantage for his or her own gain. The moral of the story? "Beware of fake friendships based on self-interest."

In Luke's gospel, we often see these kinds of references, as he tells us about Jesus. Luke, a non-Jewish physician and writer, was highly educated and most likely a close friend of Paul. He was not only a gospel writer but a historian as well. Writing for his countrymen, Luke used explanations and language that would have appealed to a Greek reader.

The experience of Jesus in our scripture for today brings out some of that rich, Greek flavor, as Jesus refers to Herod as a fox and himself as a hen, who desires to protect Jerusalem from underhanded

influences they don't seem to recognize. As much as Jesus wants to defend Jerusalem, they want no part of his protection. They do not know Herod as he does.

Now we must remember too that this same Herod had killed Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist three years earlier. Now he's told by some of the Pharisees that Herod has a mark on Jesus' own head as well. Jesus is not surprised.

Jesus sees Herod as a two-faced coward, selfish, manipulative, underhanded, and a "fake Jew." Herod acts the Jew when he wants Jerusalem's favor. He pretends to be one of them, all the while serving his own needs for money, attention, power, and perks from the Roman government. He's polite and acts the part of liaison with the Jerusalem religious authorities, all the while undermining and controlling them in every way possible. He's selfish and power-hungry, and he'll let nothing threaten his goals, his status, and his cushy, yet precarious, situation. Herod is all about Herod. And given the chance, he'd eat Jerusalem alive, if it meant saving his own skin –or his hunger for power and prestige. Sound Familiar

Luke's reference to fox and hen would bring up exactly these connotations for his predominantly Greek readers. Just as Paul would work beside those immersed in other traditions and cultures, acknowledge their religion, but then tell about Jesus, using his own experiences and stories about Jesus' life that they could understand –so too would Luke write to his Greek contemporaries in language and references they could understand, to tell the stories of Jesus' encounters, life, promise, and identity.

We can hear Jesus' lament in this passage about his love and care for Jerusalem, and we can sense his knowing mistrust of Herod, the crafty fox, who would destroy his unknowing and ignorant people.

Jesus asserts in the scripture that although he wanted badly to protect and teach them, his colleagues and those in power in Jerusalem will not listen to him and will not listen to his warnings about Herod and those who would seek to threaten not just their livelihood and positions but their faith and the autonomy of the Jewish people, their culture, and their moral compass. Now "their house is left to them" to defend on their own. Jesus cannot save them, as they do not believe they need to be saved. When they look at Herod, their compatriot, they cannot see the fox.

In a sense Luke is using cultural metaphors to help people understand the threat of Herod's brand of cultural and moral influence. And it comes out in the way these Jewish religious officials behave toward others in the faith.

Jesus, the Lamb, the Hen, the Door, and so many other wonderful metaphors of scripture, will continue to call out predatory behavior in nearly every parable he tells, particularly in Luke. Most everyone in his path do not heed his warnings of danger and deceit until some of those very Pharisees, along with the Chief priests, will circle him, corner him, and devour him, all under cover of the night.

In our passage for today, Jesus leaves Jerusalem for a little while longer. His time has not yet come. But he knows it soon will. For Jerusalem, with eyes closed and with the heart of the fox, will kill its prophet, this time, God's own Son.

Throughout time, as in Jesus' time, cultures of power, self-centeredness, self-sufficiency, and acquisition have always offered snares, traps, and self-promotion in disguise that Jesus might call a bit "foxy." But our best way of discerning what is true and what is fake is to allow Jesus into our henhouse!

The House of God, both then and now, must keep Jesus as its Head. Then and only then can Christ's wisdom, grace, and promise be its best and primary guide.

May your "house" be blessed, your "hens" be wise, and your "foxes" be discouraged.