

Psalm 27

Luke 13: 31-35

“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!”
(Luke 13:34)

From the thin sliver of forested wilderness lying behind our house in Dexter, I heard the unmistakable high-pitched scream of a red fox in early winter; it was mating season. That sound is more like the opening scene in Jordan Peele’s latest horror movie than anything else in nature, but is just the distinctive sound of a fox looking for love. It is such a piercing sound that it can send shivers down your back and prompt more than a hint of fear.

If we are lucky, we’ll soon see a female red fox with her litter of kits romping on the edge of our wilderness. Fox are secretive, cunning and tricky shape-shifters; and just watching these mercurial creatures evokes both fear and curiosity.

This is the backdrop for framing why Jesus, upon entering Jerusalem, might tag Herod as a fox. Jesus is talking to a crowd when some Pharisees come by. Looking agitated, they make their way to Jesus and breathlessly warn him to leave the city---because King Herod has plans to kill him. Jesus is not impressed; in fact, he seems annoyed, and tells the Pharisees that he is doing God’s important work of healing the sick, broken, forgotten people and confronting evil: *“Tell that fox...”* (Luke 13:23) is Jesus’ pithy retort when he hears that Herod is seeking his life.

With a horrific war roaring in Europe-- in the Ukraine, and a deadly pandemic still wrecking lives and communities, it can be a risky endeavor to ask a question like, “What are you afraid of?” Risky because it’s a question that prompts some vulnerability. But important to ask.

Of course, in some crowds you’ll get answers like this: I’m afraid of spiders, basements, heights, coyotes, or autocratic rulers. In others you’ll hear responses such as I’m anxious about: math class, picking up the coronavirus at Meijer, not getting into a good college, not finding a job, speaking in public, not making the team, a war in Europe.

Truthfully, we're all afraid of many things, whether we admit it publicly or not: we're afraid of not having enough (fill in the blank: money, time, antibodies), of losing something or someone, of dying, of failing, and yes, sometimes of insects or storms. Fear is one of those universals, even if the details differ between us. It can be a valuable question to ask, even as a point of personal reflection. What do you fear?

In times like this, I think back to theologian Paul Tillich's three dimensions of anxiety, and realize that any collection of people in our post-pandemic, war-wounded world can easily cover all three bases. Humans, Tillich observed, must first confront the anxiety of death, or nonbeing. Second, we must face the anxiety of meaninglessness—not having a purpose in life. Third, the anxiety of fate—or the unpredictability or uncertainty of modern life can easily overwhelm us. Sure, I realize that fear and anxiety are distinct from each other. Fear has an object; anxiety is free-floating, a generic kind of fright. But they are close relatives, each warning us when there are threats to our lives.

"The Lord is my light and my salvation, what shall I fear?" the Psalmist asks (Psalm 27:1). *"The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"* (Psalm 27:1). These are but two of the more than 300 references to fear in our scriptures. A wide range of emotions are captured in the Hebrew and Greek words for fear, including everything from awe and immense respect to heart pounding terror. In Psalm 27, what sparks fear is revealed to be slanderers, adversaries, breathers of violence and betraying relatives. To respond to their threats, the Psalmist does not appeal to simple clichés, such as *"When the going gets tough, the tough get going."* Nor does the Psalmist make light of real danger by counseling everyone who is afraid to *"make lemons out of lemonade"* or suggest that those under threat project the image of having all the *"right stuff."* No, the Psalmist knows if there is to be any encouragement, any antidote to fear, it has to come from the outside of the anxious soul. So confident that the Lord is his light, salvation and stronghold, the Psalmist affirms that courage can and does overcome our fears and anxieties:

*For [the Lord] will hide me in [the] shelter in the day of trouble;
[God] will conceal me under the cover of [a] tent;
[the Lord] will set me high on a rock.*

Psalm 27:5 NRSV

No matter how bleak the circumstances, the bad times are not able to shake the writer of this Psalmist's confidence in God. This one, this Psalmist, this inspired poet, knows God's faithfulness.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel emphasized that the role of the prophet, and the Psalmist, is *"to cast out fear."* The psalmist does this using poetry in the service of prophecy, showing a way to transform fear into energy, to convert danger into possibility and to switch power from the scary present to the things that might be. *"I believe,"* the psalmist exclaims, *"that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living* (Psalm 27:13)."

Jesus, through story, parable and pointed conversations, shows the way to reverse the power dynamics of fear, and flips what was hugely anxious into weakness. He elevates what is ordinary into truth. Even though present conditions in the world appear to deny God's goodness, we can with the Psalmist, and with Jesus, trust

that which is unseen. God will be faithful—“*the Lord will take me up*” (Psalm 27:5). This assurance is the heart of the gospel.

Here is Jesus, who is hard at work using his power to crush evil and heal people. He is busy, and not even death will stop him. Jesus has an agenda—and it challenges Herod and the forces in Jerusalem that kill the messengers of God. If you compare the power of Jesus to the power of the king, it seems like Jesus is on the losing side. He has no army. He ends up getting killed by rulers like Herod. But in reality, Jesus doesn’t lose. His work of healing all of creation continues long after Herod and Rome have faded away.

The struggle between Herod and Jesus reverberates through history and bursts into reality today: through a simple man from India who stood against an entire empire; through a young, black minister who fought for the civil rights of all without repaying violence in kind; through the countless men and women in Ukraine and all of Eastern Europe who today stand against a totalitarian ideology and a brutal war machine. We think of Lent as a dull time, as Jesus heads toward Jerusalem and his death. But Lent is also a time of hope. It’s a reminder that God’s reign is coming and that not Herod, not Pilate, not Caesar will be able to stop it.

In Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives, sits a small chapel named *Dominus Flevit*. Its name comes from this story in Luke’s Gospel, and it is the traditional site where Jesus wept over the city that rejected his ministry. And did I tell you that the chapel, built in the 1950s, was constructed in the shape of a teardrop?

I visited *Dominus Flevit* on a cold, sunny day in 2010. Inside the tiny chapel, the altar is centered before a high, arched window that looks out over Jerusalem. Detailed iron grillwork divides the view into sections, so that on bright sunny days the effect is that of a stained-glass window. The difference, though, is that this subject is alive; this is no artist’s interpretation of the Holy City but Jerusalem itself, with the Dome of the Rock in the bottom left corner and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the middle.¹

Positioned down below, on the front of the altar is a picture of what never happened in that city. It’s a stunning mosaic of a white hen with a golden halo around her head. Her red comb proudly resembles a crown, and her wings are spread wide to shelter the pale, yellow chicks that swarm around her feet. I counted seven happy, safe chicks, with tiny black dots for eyes and orange dots for beaks. The hen is primed to do battle if anyone comes near her babies.

¹ For a brief introduction to Dominus Flevit, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dominus_Flevit_Church

But the scene never happened and the picture does not pretend that it did. The mosaic is encircled with this verse, written in red, and in Latin, that translated into English reads,

“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!”

(Luke 13:35).

Interestingly, the very last words are set outside the circle, in a pool of red underneath the chick’s feet: *you were not willing*.

All told, Luke mentions Jerusalem 90 times in his Gospel so it’s easy to conclude that Luke loves the city, so rich in symbol and history, so packed with expectation and fear. Jerusalem is the dwelling place of God, the place where God’s glory will be revealed to all (Is.24:23). It is also the place where God is betrayed by those who hate the good and love what is evil (Micah 3:2)

Given the number of animals available, it is curious that Jesus chooses a hen. Where is the biblical model for that? What about the mighty eagle of Exodus, or Hosea’s stealthy leopard? What about the proud lion of Judah, mowing down his enemies with a roar? Compared to any of those, a mother hen does not inspire much confidence. No wonder some of the chicks decided to go with the fox.

Jesus won’t be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first. How do you like that image of God? I find it comforting, but in terms of protection from foxes it leaves me wanting for more. When the foxes of this world start snooping close to home, when you can hear them crying in the night just outside your window, then it would be good to have something a little bigger than a chicken in the homeland security department.

Here is Jesus being Jesus in Jerusalem, nothing more, nothing less. He bore wounds on his body, and he, too, meant to protect the chicks from the foxes. But he would not become a fox himself to fight them. He would not fight fire with fire. When Herod and his thugs came after Jesus and his brood of disciples, he didn’t resort to violence. He just set himself between Herod’s soldier’s and the chicks, all crazed with fear, and he just hunkered down like a mother hen.

It may have appeared to be a minor fight to those who were there, but that contest between the fox and the hen was really the cosmic battle of all time, in which the power of fang and claw ran up against the power of a mother’s love for her chicks. And as Barbara Brown Taylor says, “God bet the farm on the hen.”²

Depending on what you see and what you believe, then she won! It didn’t look that way at first, with feathers and blood all over the place and chicks running for their lives. But as the scene unfolded, it became clear that

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, (Crowley Publications, Boston, 1997), p. 126.

Bet on the Hen

March 13, 2022
Second Sunday in Lent
The Reverend Jay Sanderford

she had refused to run from the foxes, and she had refused to become one of them. She loved her own right to the end. She died a mother hen, and afterwards visited them to show them the marks on her body so they wouldn't miss the point: that even the power of foxes could not kill her love for her chicks. They might have to endure what she went through to escape the foxes, but she would be there for them on the other side of things, waiting with a love that is stronger than death.

Only after I read this story do I consider the church as a mother hen, but it makes sense today. The church of Christ is really a big, fierce, fluffed-up hen, offering shelter, warmth, and companionship to all kinds and colors and shapes of chicks, including the orphans, the runts, the rejects, the punks, and maybe even a couple of geese. Imagine this! The church of Jesus Christ putting herself down between the foxes of this world and the tiny, fragile chicks, offering herself up before her brood. Imagine the church staying close to whose body she is, by refusing to run from the foxes and refusing to become one of them.

If we are willing to take up the challenge of this haunting episode from Luke's Gospel, I believe God will use us for the shelter and care and well-being of our community, our world, and our own congregation. God will set us down somewhere where we will be needed, and God will use us for sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ!