

Luke 13:31-35 - Lent 2
God's love as a mother hen

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31 At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." 32 He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. 33 Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' 34 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! 35 See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Intro:

Today is the second Sunday in the Lenten journey with Jesus to the Cross and Resurrection. In Lent you are invited to trace Jesus' journey thru life and death into new life because it is the journey we are called to follow. All Christians are to be Jesus followers. All Christians are to be on a learning curve known as 'discipleship' in the pattern of Jesus.

To be a disciple of Jesus on the journey he sets out, we need to look closely at Jesus and listen carefully to what he says. He is the way! He is the route. He is the journey.

This morning our Gospel reading shows Jesus at another point in his journey to the cross and new life. Last week he was in the wilderness getting his basic questions worked out. (Who am I, what am I doing here and what about death?) This week he is a long way in time and space from the wilderness at the gates of Jerusalem about to enter another dangerous time and place.

In the wilderness Jesus was in a slow moving time of loneliness and hunger. He was very weak and running on his last reserves. Today at the gates of Jerusalem it is very different. He is not alone and a storm of developments and incidents are about to break upon him. That is the normal difference between a desert and a city. In the desert he could hear himself think and wait in silence for the voice of God, in the city everything needs to happen now because everything is in motion.

I want to share with you two things I see in Jesus and hear from him in the four verses. If you also see these things it may change the way you see and hear Jesus? Let's find out.

Body:

The first thing I see is what I describe as fierce determination. Jesus is on the mission assigned to him. As he approaches Jerusalem some of his friends and supporters make a risk assessment and advise him to get out while he could. Rightly or wrongly, some friendly Pharisees believed that Jesus was in danger from King Herod. If you remember what happened to John the Baptist this is not surprising.

What would you expect a sensible person to do upon being told this? In the countryside one is much safer than within the walls of a complex city. Do you stay out in the hills and keep distance or would you proceed into the lion's den? Jesus' replies to those warning of danger:

32 "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. 33 Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'

This is sharp language by Jesus in which he reveals his own assessment of the situation. Herod is a fox. Yes, that stands for sly, cunning and vicious. [*That is not nice!*] Go tell Herod that what I am doing I will continue to do because like all the prophets before me I must be killed inside Jerusalem.

Jesus is aware of the danger but he assesses his priorities very differently. Can you remember where Jesus first learned this fierce determination? I suggest it was in the wilderness. It was in the testing in the desert that he learned to choose for Father God's call over being dominated by the manifest dangers about him. Doing that takes some fierceness. Standing firm in your resolve to walk the call you have been called to may at times mean calling a spade a spade and embracing dangers that some consider irresponsible. *[That may not be nice!]*

This sort of fierce outspoken determination is not what I learnt at the Sunday school picnic but this is Jesus in his own words. It is not so much about heroics or calling someone by an animal name as staying the course on which we are called despite the danger warnings. Jesus matches the danger warning against what he is called to do and decides from there. Friends, we need to know and remember our calling.

So that is the first snap-shot of fierceness I perceive in this passage. Now comes a second.

Jesus is standing outside Jerusalem. Jerusalem was a city with clearly defined boundaries. Some cities in the world are more like that than others. If you stand on a hill outside some cities they are clearly bound entities. Jerusalem was like that. Having been told that danger waits for him inside those city walls Jesus now speaks to the city and its people;

34 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! 35 See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

What I want to focus on here is what Jesus says about himself. He has just described Herod as a fox and he now pictures himself as a broody hen, a chicken looking at her chicks.

Anyone hearing these words of Jesus after the alarm bells have just been rung warn of danger will now hear something very loving. Jesus has the heart of a mother hen for the people of Jerusalem. He knows that the way they respond to his coming is going to determine the destiny of God's people in dramatic ways for centuries to come.

So much will hang on what happens in the streets of this city and how the people, the children, of this city receive Jesus. He knows about the fox danger but the greater instinct is a heart that is clucky for its young.

For many years that was as much as I heard and saw. Jesus has a heart like a mother hen and longs to gather God's lost children. Beautiful enough?

Then in 1996 I learned to hear something in this which is not so obvious. The Hebrew language is often used to paint pictures, meaning is often conveyed by alluding to something that everyone can see or imagine. Jesus taught much by painting pictures. There is more to this picture than we may think.

At the time of Jesus there was a proverbial story about the brooding hen in a barnyard fire. People knew that when a flash-fire raced through a dry farmyard it spread very fast consuming the dry straw and plant materials lying around. In such a fire brooding chickens were known to gather their chicks and sit on them. The flash-fire would then quickly sweep past. The chicken would often die in the blaze sitting on its brood. Afterwards people would lift off the chickens and find the chicks safe and alive underneath. This behaviour is actually not unique to chickens and may occur with other bird species in forest fires as well.

The scholars¹ suggest that this is what Jesus was evoking when he made that statement. Jesus saw the coming fire, he knew that the danger was great for the children of Jerusalem and he longed to be the hen that held them safe in the fire.

Can you hear the fierce love in his words?

34 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! 35 See, your house is left to you.

After the flash-fire the house is left standing but that is all. It is just a shell.

This is a dramatic passionate expression of fierce love, a love that will not let go and longs to hold on even at the cost of its life.

When we hear the Words: God is Love, or God so loved the world, or the Love of God has been poured into our hearts, we may need to add a touch of this fierceness into the mix. It is a love that will go through fire to protect its own. This is the love behind the Gospel.

Conclusion:

I want to conclude by making a single suggestion: Take time to contemplate this. Look and Jesus and let his words sink deeper into your bones. This is who loves us and whom we are following.

¹ Source: N.T. Wright as heard in 1996