

SERIES: THE OVERLOOKED PEOPLE OF LENT: HOW GOD USES ORDINARY PEOPLE FOR EXTRAORDINARY PURPOSES

SERMON: THE MAN WHO THOUGHT HE WAS KING

SCRIPTURE: LUKE 13:31-35

Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, wanted to be known as Herod, King of Galilee. He was a murderous thug who was out to kill Jesus. His notorious affair with his brother's wife, Herodias, was his eventual downfall. It affronted his subjects who were devout Jews and, of course, enraged his first wife. When John the Baptist thundered against his marriage to Herodias, Herod slapped him into prison, and later at Herodias' insistence had John beheaded. Jesus came next on Herod's list to eliminate. Herodias badgered Herod to demand the title of king from the Roman Emperor, who ignored this feckless playboy tyrant.

When we think of the accounts of Holy Week and what we call Lent, Herod is a minor player. None-the-less, he does require a careful look as Jesus' journey to the cross unfolds.

When Jesus is alerted to Herod's intentions by some Pharisees, he sends a message to Herod through them. Jesus could not have been more insulting. He calls Herod a fox. To the Jew a fox represented three things: First, the fox was regarded as the sneakiest of animals. Second, it was regarded as the most destructive of animals. Third, it was a symbol of a worthless and insignificant man. (1) By calling him a fox, Jesus says Herod, who would be king, personifies evil.

There is an old fable that tells of a hen and a fox. In an ironic way, it fits this passage with a fox and hen. (2) A fox was trotting past a farmyard early one morning. He spied a hen sitting atop a chicken coop. She was too high for him to snatch, but he entertained the thought of chicken for breakfast. “Why my dear hen,” the fox called to her. “What a pleasure to see you. Won’t you come down and let me greet you properly?”

“I’d love to,” replied the hen, “but, as you know, there are some animals who would like nothing more than to grab me and eat me.”

“Why my dear hen,” exclaimed the fox, “do you mean to say you haven’t heard the news? All the animals have agreed to live in peace with one another.”

While the fox spoke, however, the hen kept craning her neck as though she could see something very interesting in the distance.

“My dear, what in the world do you see up there that is so interesting?” asked the fox.

“Oh, nothing much, just a pack of dogs headed in this direction and running at a fast clip,” said the hen.

“Please excuse me,” the fox said nervously. “I just thought of something I forgot.”

“What’s the hurry?” asked the hen. “I was just coming down for our talk. You don’t mean to say you have anything to be afraid of now that the animals have a wonderful peace plan?”

“Well,” replied the fox as he started to run, “Maybe those hounds haven’t heard about it yet!”

Like the fox in fable, King Herod seeks to lure Jesus into his snare to do him in, but Jesus is too smart for him. Jesus’ enemies will kill him, but it will be on his terms. After telling off Herod, Jesus laments the situation

of Jerusalem. The people are oppressed by Herod and are famous for rejecting the prophets God sends to them. The danger before them is real and present. They face God's judgment, via the Romans. Yet, though they break God's heart by their rejection of him, God still wishes to protect and nurture them. To illustrate, Jesus turns to the hen image. He likens his desire, as God's, for Jerusalem as that of a mother hen, who instinctively draws her chicks under her wings when danger threatens. The psalmist says that God as a mother hen is steadfast (36.7) and we are the delight of her eye (17.8). So, it's an apt image.

Jesus' image goes deeper. There are stories of mother hens protecting their young in barnyard fires. When flames rage about them and escape is blocked, mother hens gather their chicks under their wings. It is not uncommon for those cleaning after a fire to report finding a dead hen, scorched and blackened, with live chicks protected and alive under her wings. She has literally given her life to protect them.

It is a vivid and violent image of what Jesus declared he longed to do for Jerusalem and, in fact, for all the world. But at that moment in his encounter with Herod via the Pharisees, all Jesus could see were chicks scurrying about, taking no notice of the smoke and flames and approaching danger. They did not heed the warnings of the one who could give them safety. The picture of the hen and chicks is Jesus' statement about what his death will be about. (4)

The fox and hen symbolize alternatives before us. Evil threatens us like a fox threatens a hen. The mother hen laments because we, her children, are exposed but don't

take advantage of her protection. In this passage Luke is asking us: What more can the hen do but stand up to the fox and offer shelter to her young? What will become of the young, if they do not accept the shelter of their mother's wings?

In a world filled with disease, despair, death, and destruction, Jesus offers us an alternative. He offers recovery, renewal, redemption, and resurrection. Herod will get his wish; Jesus will die. But Jesus' death will defeat that old fox and the evil he personifies. Herod thinks he is king but Jesus knows otherwise.

It may seem a stretch to say that Herod is an ordinary person who God used for an extraordinary purpose. It may seem hard to imagine he could teach us much about living godly lives and being Jesus' disciple. Last week we had a positive role model in the man who carried the water jug to lead the disciples to the upper room where they prepared the Passover meal for Jesus and the twelve. He demonstrated humility, obedience, and courage. Today we have a bad guy, an egregiously bad guy, in King Herod. Evil as he was, we can learn from him.

Herod demonstrates that things are not always what they appear to be. Herod and his constituents thought he was in control. Even his benefactors, the Romans, did, otherwise they would have replaced him. Herod was the law. What he said went. Therefore he thought he could eliminate Jesus and any threat Jesus represented to him. Jesus had followers who pledged their loyalty and support to him. Herod needed to stop this before it got out of hand, and he would. Or so he thought.

God had other plans. Jesus would die but it had to be on a cross. It had to be the most humiliating and painful death ever devised. Jesus had to receive the worst the world is capable of giving in order to defeat the worst evil has to offer. Herod could not provide that, only the Romans could, and they would.

So, God used Pharisees, of all people, to warn Jesus of Herod's intentions. Once again, things are not always what they appear to be as God works out his plan. Through the gospels we see Pharisees challenging Jesus and acting as obstacles to his mission. They even eventually join ranks with the chief priest to demand Jesus' crucifixion from Pilate. But, in this instance they warn Jesus to protect him from Herod. Why? Maybe not all Pharisees were antagonistic toward Jesus. Maybe they were angry at Herod and wanted to subvert him in some way. Maybe one of them accidentally blurted it out. Who knows? But this much we do know: It was out of character for Pharisees to be helpful in any way to Jesus. Yet, in God's providence, things are not always what they appear to be.

Herod demonstrates how God can bend evil intentions to good ends. Remember the Old Testament story of Joseph? His jealous brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt, only years later to venture to Egypt for food relief from famine. Unbeknownst to them Joseph had risen from slavery to leadership in Pharaoh's court and was able to meet their needs as he welcomed reunion with them. His comment to them was "What you meant for evil, God meant for good." And as Paul wrote to the Romans, "God works for good in all things..." Even in the worst of situations God works redemptively.

This conversation with the Pharisees about Herod, gave Jesus the opportunity to proclaim the gospel message that his mission was to cast out demons, perform cures, and rise from the dead on the third day. He insisted that he must go to Jerusalem and face his death there, according to God's plan. Herod and all of Jesus' opponents were being drawn together into one evil action, which God would use to defeat them and redeem this world he made and loves.

Herod and his plan demonstrate that God has the last laugh. As someone humorously said, "Your arms are too short to box with God!" Herod thought he was king. He thought his arms extended throughout Galilee and beyond. He thought he had power and control; he had plans for Jesus. But so did God. As someone else said, "We make plans and God laughs." Well, Herod was among those who laughed when Jesus was crucified. But, we know the rest of the story. God laughed at everything and everyone who stood in his way. Herod thought the crucifixion was the final chapter in the story of Jesus. He failed to realize, however, that God is the author of that story and it goes on forever. Now God has written us into Jesus' story and it is a comedy with a happy ending. We're invited to laugh with God at all that seeks to upend his love and grace.

As we look at this scoundrel thug, Herod, one of the overlooked people of Lent, we remember things are not always as they appear to be in God's providence. God can bend evil intentions to good ends. And God gets the last laugh. It all boils down to this for us: Hope. In Jesus God has demonstrated that no situation is beyond his capacity to address and rectify. No human being has the power to derail God's providence and mission. This hope leads to

confidence. If you know God is in control, working to right what is wrong, you can jump into what God is doing, without fear of what others may think or do. You can live confidently that God's love always prevails and nothing can separate you from it.

Sources:

1. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, Westminster Press, p.186
2. This is an adaption of one of Aesop's Fables.
3. *The New Interpreters Bible*, Abingdon Press, p. 828
4. Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, WJK, p.171-172