

The Fox and the Hen

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Eagle River, Wisconsin
March 17, 2019

Dale L. Bishop

Text: Luke 13:31-35

During my tenure as Middle East executive for our denomination and for the Disciples of Christ, I probably visited Jerusalem at least 25 times. For many pastors, a visit to the Holy Land comes as a reward from a grateful congregation for many years of faithful service, or it is the highlight of a hard-earned sabbatical leave. But for me, it was part of my job. I went to Jerusalem to visit and to work with Palestinian church leaders and church workers, some of whose support came from our churches in the United States. Sometimes I would also meet with Jews and Muslims who were engaged in the seemingly endless, and endlessly frustrating, task of peacemaking. I never went to Jerusalem for the express purpose that leads most Christians to visit the holy city, which is to make a pilgrimage.

In fact, for a time—and this is a confession—I kind of looked down my nose at the pilgrims. I would see them in their tourist buses, with their little flags that were given them to help them to stay together as a group, rushing from one holy place to another, armed with their cameras and their guide books. Colleagues and I used to joke that people who came to the Holy Land to walk in Jesus' footsteps usually ended up running in them. And it would continually irritate me, and still does, that many American Christians visit the Holy Land as if they're visiting a large museum, filled with interesting artifacts, but not populated by real people. They visit the ancient stones without ever getting to know the living ones, the ones who constitute the church in the place where the church first came into being.

But there was something else to my somewhat snobbish attitude, and here's where the real confession comes in. When I began my work in the Middle East, mine was pretty much an intellectual faith. I didn't really see the point of making a pilgrimage because, I reasoned, you can believe what you believe wherever you happen to be. I didn't need to touch the slab of marble in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher where tradition has it that Jesus' body was laid and prepared for burial in order to believe that Jesus was crucified. I didn't need to crawl inside the ornate, and empty, tomb that the church has

built around the cave that is supposed to be Jesus' tomb in order to believe in the Resurrection. In fact the sight of all those people from all around the world weeping and wailing as they touched the holy stones of Jerusalem was rather off-putting for me. My faith, I secretly believed, was more sophisticated than all that.

But a funny thing happened. The more often I visited Jerusalem, the more awestruck I was by its holiness. It wasn't that I suddenly came to believe that holiness oozes from particular places because God has assigned holiness to them; it was that I actually experienced holiness there. I experienced that holiness in the coming together of past and present: of holy things done there, and holy things being done there. Jesus' welcoming of children, his lifting them up and holding them in his arms and saying that this is what the kingdom of heaven is about, for example, joined with Lizzie Nasser's founding an orphanage and then a school for poor and displaced Palestinian children. Lizzie was a Palestinian Episcopalian laywoman who just never learned her proper place in a male-dominated society. She saw the need for an orphanage and a school, cajoled the men into making it possible, and went on to call her school "The Garden of Flowers." Her Garden of Flowers became a garden of love and care in the midst of a desert of conflict and oppression. We still support that school through our church's child sponsorship program. Holiness isn't a matter of pure intellect or of abstract thought; holiness often is physical. You can taste it and feel it. Psalm 34 invites us to "Taste and see how gracious the Lord is."

In Luke's account of Jesus' life, the one we are following during this lectionary year, we're reminded frequently of how important Jerusalem was for Jesus. It was already a holy city, a destination for pilgrimage, in Jesus' time. In his two-volume history of Jesus and the church, his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, Luke referred to Jerusalem 90 times; in the entire remainder of the New Testament, Jerusalem is mentioned only about half that number. Jerusalem was where important things happened. It wasn't just Jesus' destination; it was his destiny. On the mount of Transfiguration, he and Moses and Elijah discussed his exodus, his death, which would be accomplished in Jerusalem. Shortly after that conversation, Luke tells us, "Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem." Jerusalem was where holiness would be realized, where it would be made real in the climactic events of Holy Week. Jerusalem would be the place where holiness and goodness would be redefined from obedience to the Law to self-sacrificing love.

But holiness and goodness and love don't exist in splendid isolation. They are revealed in the face of evil, in contrast to evil. In today's lesson, we encounter one of those manifestations of evil in the reappearance of our old friend Herod. Herod keeps popping up in Luke's gospel like a bad penny. Remember that this Herod isn't the one who tried to snuff out Jesus' life when Jesus was still an infant. That was Herod the Great. This Herod is one of the sons of Herod the Great. This Herod is the one who had John the Baptist executed at the behest of his wife. She had been displeased by John's denunciation of her and her husband's behavior. Luke tells us that this same Herod, called Herod Antipas, worried that Jesus might be a reincarnation of John who had come back to haunt him. And now, as Jesus was about to enter Jerusalem, some Pharisees, of all people, were warning Jesus that Herod wanted to kill him.

"Tell that fox that I've got no time for him right now," Jesus told the Pharisees. "I have my mission to complete, and on the third day my work will be over." You probably all know that the shortest verse in the King James Version of the Bible is the one that says, simply, "Jesus wept." Well, I wonder if there wasn't another one that never made the final cut that said, "Jesus laughed," because surely Jesus laughed. And I know that you all were sent an image of the laughing Jesus by Pastor Jeff and his collaborator, Kathy Holperin. And we know that Jesus had a sense of humor, no matter how solemn we try to make him. When Jesus called Herod a fox, he had to be laughing, because he was making fun of a pseudo-emperor, a collaborator with the Romans, who liked to imagine himself as a lion, the king of beasts, the symbol of majesty, courage and strength. That's the symbol that appeared on Herod's coins and on his coat of arms. Nobody put a fox on their coat of arms; the fox was known to be voracious, unscrupulous and sly. And nothing infuriates a tyrant more than humor at the tyrant's expense.

And then, when he had finished skewering Herod, Jesus used one of the strangest, and yet most touching of images as he spoke about himself. He addressed Jerusalem, the city that claimed to be a place of holiness and peace but which was, at the same time, a city of corruption and evil. "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." Here is Herod, the voracious and cunning fox, about to attack the henhouse, and all that Jesus has to offer by way of protection is himself, but alas he is only one of the hens.

I wonder if, in your life, you have ever wanted to protect a loved one from something awful, but felt absolutely powerless to do so. Perhaps it was a spouse or a child afflicted by a frightening and potentially fatal disease. “Take me instead,” you’ve said. “I’m old and this child is young, with her whole life before her.” Or, “I can’t imagine a life that would be worth living without my wife to share it with me.” I’ve been there, and I know that some of you have been there, too. Or perhaps you’ve had to watch as a loved one almost compulsively engaged in self-destructive behavior. Nothing you said or did could change that behavior, and you had to watch helplessly as that loved one spun down, down into the pit of addiction, down into the jaws of that voracious fox. If you could have given up your life to save that other person, you would have done it, done it in a heartbeat. But, of course, the world isn’t constructed that way, and often, too often, we are compelled to stand by and watch as personal tragedy unfolds.

At such moments, all we can do is weep. It was that sense of helplessness that made Jesus weep. Jesus mourned Jerusalem twice. When he was threatened by Herod the fox, he lamented that Jerusalem’s children ultimately wouldn’t accept the shelter of his wings, that some of them would choose to cast their lot with the fox. And when he entered Jerusalem that final time, he wept for a city that did not know, and still does not know, the things that make for peace. Jerusalem, after all, is Jerusalem. It claims holiness, but it still kills the prophets; it is a city both of prayers and of oppression. Jerusalem is us, with our trust in the foxes of this world and our disdain for the self-giving love that Jesus offered and continues to offer.

We can’t keep that awful disease away from our loved one, as much as we might wish that it would afflict us instead. And we can’t make that wayward child choose life instead of death. All that we can do is what Jesus promised that he would do for us. All that we can do is open our wings in love. If you’re looking for protection from the bad things in life; if you’re willing to sacrifice everything you have or are for security; if you’re looking for someone who will outfox the fox, then Jesus is not your man. And no one is. But if you’re looking for someone who will love you unconditionally, who will stay with you and weep with and over you, who will always confront power with love, love that ultimately has the last word over sin and death, then follow Jesus on this Lenten journey. He will give his life for you and to you, even as he shelters you under his wings. Amen.