

A Hen in the Fox's Den  
Luke 13:31-35  
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According to a Steck family legend, my maternal grandfather one day decided he would raise squirrels to sell as meat during economic hard times. So, he trapped or bought several of the critters and kept them in a cage in his back yard and fed them scraps from the kitchen. Perhaps not surprisingly, the squirrels were not really too keen on living in what amounted to a prison, and so developed, or at least revealed, a mean streak as wide as the same state of Texas in which they were being incarcerated. Apparently it became harder and harder to feed them without being bitten by their sharp little squirrel teeth, so some adjustments to the cage were necessary. So my grandfather went out one day with his toolbox to fix it and proceeded to drop his hammer inside the cage, where, after several attempts to retrieve it, it remained. Until the last ornery, unsold squirrel died of old age. Perhaps you know people like that too. Jesus certainly did. They were called Pharisees.

My grandfather more successfully raised chickens, more specifically laying hens for eggs, and thus also had the requisite henhouse in which the hens would produce their eggs. The great fear of hens everywhere, and the farmers who keep them, is of course, the wily fox, which, like a starving man with an all-you-can-eat

pass at Kentucky Fried Chicken, goes berserk at the prospect of so much food in one little space, and enters in. Can't you just hear the squawking now?

Jesus calls King Herod just such a creature, upon learning that this regional ruler of the Roman Empire has designs on his life. Like the fox, which is not the largest, fiercest, or even the most feared of predators, neither was King Herod at the top of the political food chain that was the Roman Empire. This son of Herod the Great, the Herod of the time of Jesus' birth, was but an installed underling of the Emperor, in charge of keeping his corner of the empire quiet and productive. But in that role, Herod Antipas could be as ruthless as he wished, could stalk the hens and chicks under his charge and take them away in the night without warning, as he did with John the Baptist. Life under empire is like life in the barnyard; the fox is always a threat to enter the henhouse, and the fear which that threat provokes is almost as terrifying as the rampage when it actually happens.

There is also, however, that larger henhouse of human existence, which is supposed to be a place of safety, a place to get out of the cold and wind and rain, and to be healthy and productive. Under the roof of family and community and religious institution, we find ourselves, or should find ourselves, a little less threatened by the storms of life, and the unpleasantnesses of life in the wild. It is under these shelters that we cultivate imagination, and beauty, and friendship, and give birth to art, and literature, and architecture, and music. It is under these shelters that we flourish and become all that God intends us to be. But alas, you

know as well as I do that, that these henhouses too are stalked by foxes, and paralyzed by the fear the threat represents. Naming Herod as the fox names every such threat to human life. Hear the words from Luke again with a different twist: “At that hour, some doctors came to him and said, ‘Get away from here, for cancer wants to kill you,’ ” or “At that hour, some police came to him and said, ‘Get away from here, addiction wants to kill your child.’ ” The fox is always a threat to the peace of the henhouse.

Farmers try various methods to protect the investment of the henhouse, and to keep the peace of the barnyard. Besides its role in making the eggs, the rooster is part of the line of defense against the fox. And then there are the dogs and the electrified fences, and the motion detector lighting, and who knows what other means of discouraging the predator. But still the fox comes in the night, and enters in and causes havoc, and even when it doesn't, the fear that the threat represents causes us to build up yet more costly defenses, and keeps us paralyzed and anxious, and we produce less of what we are blessed by God to produce.

Against such an image of fear, we might expect Jesus to invoke an even more fearsome image to keep the fox at bay. But as we hear Luke's words, no such image emerges of a wild boar or a lion, or something else larger and fiercer than a fox. No, we are given the exact opposite image, the hen, the picture of weakness and meekness, the prey itself of the dangerous fox. We might be more comforted if Jesus had used some of that great Old Testament language about vanquished

enemies and awe-inspiring acts of nature, but instead, he chooses to offer an image of comfort and nurture, a hen gathering her chicks under her wing for protection. I don't know about you, but at first glance, I do not feel very reassured by this image, and maybe neither did the people of Jerusalem, for Jesus tells us of their persistent refusal to take refuge under those wings: "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, but you were not willing!" Like desperate farmers against the threat of foxes, God's people have relied on barnyard dogs and electrified fences and motion detector lighting, instead of the hen who offers the shelter of her wings. You remember the stories of the kings who "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord," who worshiped the idols of other nations, and who "bought the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals," as the prophet Amos tells us. Then as now, we have always turned to our own measures of security, yet Jesus offers us not an image of strength, but of weakness. Jesus must know something we don't about the kingdom of God.

Well, as always, Jesus turns our logic upside down, and that is what the kingdom is all about. Here's what I think we are to learn from tonight's passage: that God is not content to wait around the barnyard forever for the inevitable attacks of the wily fox on the henhouse, but rather, God does the unexpected and sends the hen straight into the fox's den to confront the terror head on. What was it

that Jesus told the Pharisees who came to him to tell him about Herod's threat on his life: "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. 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 the inexorable march of Jesus toward Jerusalem, toward Good Friday and Easter Sunday, that Luke so carefully makes sure we see throughout the final chapters of his Gospel: that Jesus is heading straight for the lair of the enemy to confront the terror within. "I *must* be on my way," Jesus says, using that Greek word for must, "dei," the word that signifies the divine necessity of a thing. "I *must* be on my way" to Jerusalem, because God has sent me there, the hen entering the fox's den.

We see already on the journey some of the strategy the hen will use. "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures," gathering frightened chicks under her wings, pulling them to safety as with so many others in the Gospels, and as with us. Even though history suggests that not all will seek cover under those wings – "you were not willing," he reminds them – Jesus nevertheless journeys on, and welcomes along the way those who will accept what he has to offer. And when he arrives at the fox's den, he will take on the threat we human beings live with every day. You see, the hen *must* confront the fox, for the sake of the chicks; it is the divine imperative. But as is customary with Jesus, it will not happen in the traditional way. When he arrives in Jerusalem, Jesus will confront Herod and

Empire and sin not with sword and shield, but with suffering and salvation, with compassion and mercy, with justice and righteousness.

When the hen enters the fox's den, you know which animal will kill the other, but you also know which one will emerge victorious. I would like to leave you with an image of that battle in the fox's den, a reality that perhaps Jesus knew, but at the very least a reality that farmers around the world have seen, which we know takes place. What they've seen are hens that gather their chicks under their wings to cover them during a barnyard fire, dying themselves, burnt to a crisp, but saving the lives of the chicks beneath their wings. Many a farmer has been pleasantly surprised to find living chicks under a dead hen when everything else on the farm has been wiped out. Those chicks may be a little singed, but they made it through the worst thanks to the sacrifice of the one from whom they sought shelter.

I've mixed my metaphors a little tonight, from vicious squirrels to wily foxes and courageous hens to barnyard fires, but I think you get the idea. When the world dishes out its absolute worst, when cancer and addiction and violence and torture and depression visit our lives without mercy, there is still life under the wings of the one who marches right into the midst of it all and who, despite dying, allows us to live. As you journey through this season of Lent, I invite you to reflect on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, and the great love which sent him there, a hen in the fox's den. May we each find shelter under the wings of our Lord. Amen.