

Killing the Prophets

Luke 13:31-35

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At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, “Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you.” Jesus replied, “Go tell that fox, ‘I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.’ In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Introduction:

Several weeks ago, when Ginny and I were deciding who would preach on which Sundays during Lent, I had no idea that I would be preaching on a text that involves a fox. Some of you know that I was accosted by a rabid fox right here in Old Salem back in July. Just one month after being installed as Associate Pastor, a fox tried to chew off my shoe. Of course, everyone around me has been teasing me about foxes ever since, and now even the New Testament is reminding me of my encounter! When I was young and naïve, before a fox decided to munch on me, I rather liked foxes. Disney portrayed Robin Hood as a handsome and clever fox who cared for the poor. Foxes are indeed clever, but I learned that they can some times be dangerous. When Jesus called Herod a fox, he was **not** paying him a compliment.

Herod Antipas the Fox

The Herod in our lesson for today is not King Herod the Great who we hear about at Christmas. This Herod’s son named Antipas. He called himself Herod Antipas to claim some of his father’s status for himself, much like the actor Creighton Chaney, changed his named to Lon Chaney, Jr to capitalize on his famous father’s fame. Like Lon Chaney, Jr., the star of many B-movies, Antipas did not measure up to his father, and he was bitter about that.

Herod Antipas was not a king like his father. He was merely the Tetrarch, which meant that he governed only one fourth of his father's kingdom. His two brothers ruled the rest of the kingdom. Antipas always resented the fact that all he got to rule was Galilee. Like many rich and powerful people today, Herod was ruled by resentment rather than generosity.

So long as Herod Antipas kept the peace in Galilee and collected the taxes demanded by Ceasar, the Romans let him rule his little realm. Even though he was not a king, Herod was still rich and powerful. And he was insecure. He was always afraid that the Romans would withhold their support or that one of his brothers would take his land. Herod Antipas lived in fear that someone somewhere would disrespect him or criticize him. Like a fox, Herod Antipas was always on the look-out for any sign of danger, any evidence of a potential threat, so that he could eliminate it before it gained strength.

Herod, like many powerful yet insecure people, was surrounded by mediocre men who praised him and flattered him. He had sycophants in his royal court and people who lied to him and spied for him. As you probably know, when a prophet named John the Baptist publicly accused Antipas of immorality for marrying his step-niece Herodias, Antipas had John arrested. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, Herod Antipas feared that John would inspire people to rise up and overthrow him. You know what happened next. Herod had John beheaded even though he was a righteous man.

Jesus

Jesus grew up in Nazareth in Galilee during the reign of Herod Antipas, so he was aware of Herod's insecurity and cruelty. And so, when some Pharisees came to Jesus to warn him that Herod was plotting to kill him, Jesus was probably not surprised. He may have been surprised that it was Pharisees who warned him since he was so often critical of the Pharisees, but these Pharisees did not want to see Jesus arrested and killed. It is one thing to disagree with someone over the interpretation of the Jewish law, it was something else entirely to let a fellow rabbi be killed. These unnamed Pharisees risked their lives to warn Jesus about Herod's plot to silence him forever.

But Jesus didn't need a warning. He knew who Herod was and how Herod dealt with dissent. He told the Pharisees to "tell that fox" that Jesus was not afraid of him. Tell that crafty, cunning, murderer that Jesus was going to keep doing what he was called

to do. Jesus was going to keep on healing people and driving out demons that tormented them until it was time for him to go to Jerusalem. Jesus was going to keep doing things that benefited the poor and afflicted while Herod shivered in fear on his golden throne listening to his subordinates constantly reassuring him that he was smart, clever, and wise. Jesus was going to keep healing while Herod plotted ways to kill.

Jerusalem

In three days, Jesus said, it was time to leave the relative comfort and safety of his homeland and travel to the metropolis of Jerusalem. He was not running away from the paranoid little tetrarch who thought he could intimidate him. He was walking toward greater danger. The Temple was in Jerusalem. The Sanhedrin council was in Jerusalem. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate was in Jerusalem. A thousand years of history was in Jerusalem. Stones that had been used to kill prophets were in Jerusalem. Jesus was going to one of the most symbolically important cities in the ancient world,

Unlike John Hus walking to the council of Constance, Jesus had no illusions about what awaited him in Jerusalem. He was going to Jerusalem as a prophet of the Lord, fully aware that prophets before him had been murdered in Jerusalem. At that time many people expected God's Messiah would raise an army and march to Jerusalem, slaying his enemies on the way, but Jesus walked the path of peace, not war. Jesus was walking to Jerusalem with just a motley crew of disciples. He was going to Jerusalem to lay down his life for us all. And on the way he would continue to do good: to heal the sick, confront the demons that tormented people, to bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim the words of life. Let Herod stay in his palace pretending to be ruler. Jesus had more important things to worry about.

Killing the prophets

After the Pharisees left with his message to the fox, Jesus offered a lament for Jerusalem. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing."

This is an intriguing statement since in Luke's gospel Jesus has only been to Jerusalem one time when he was a boy. He has never had the opportunity to gather the people of Jerusalem under his protective wings, nor has he been rejected by them yet. Scholars disagree over how to read this verse, but I think Jesus is speaking as a

prophet of the Lord here. It is God who is lamenting over Jerusalem. God had sent prophet after prophet to the kings of Israel and Judah who tried to save the city, but the prophets were rejected, ignored, and silenced by those with wealth and power. God describes himself as a mother hen trying to shelter chicks under her wings. We usually think of God in masculine terms, like Father, but here God is shown to be a mother trying to protect her children from being harmed by others or even by their own stupidity. God is a mother whose heart is breaking because she knows she could have saved her children from pain and suffering, but they refused her help.

Then Jesus spoke the fateful words: “See, your house is left desolate.” These are words that are devastating in their simplicity. There will be desolation even though God offered consolation. And indeed, it was just four decades after the time of Jesus, that the Romans torn down the walls of Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple built by King Herod. What had seemed permanent was shown to be fragile. In this lament, Jesus is telling us that Jerusalem’s destruction would come because the children of Abraham did not heed the warnings of prophets like Jeremiah and Michah who urged people to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. Prophet after prophet warned people that their oppression of the weak, their cruelty to the vulnerable, and their mockery of the poor would eventually destroy the kingdom and the Temple. Rather than listening to the message, they killed the messengers.

Prophets

Today we tend to think of a prophet as someone who predicts the future, and in the Bible, we see that some of the Old Testament prophets did have insight into future events. Some of them, like Nathan, served counselors to kings. Some prophets were soothsayers, but they were more than just oracles. God’s prophets were first and foremost “truth sayers.” They were the conscience of the nation. Prophets were chosen by God to speak truth to power; they warned rulers that their selfishness, sinfulness, and callousness would undermine and eventually destroy the kingdom. And most of the time, the rich and powerful ignored them.

In our modern world, we still have people who look to the future and offer advice on how to prepare for what may be coming. For example, we have people who watch for signs so they can offer reasonable predictions about the weather, technology, or the economy. Just like the prophets of Israel modern soothsayers must be truth sayers. We cannot trust them if they lie to us. Our prophets today, like those of the Old

Testament, have the duty to tell us inconvenient truths and warn us that our selfish actions can have dire consequences.

It can be hard to listen to truth sayers when they call us to repent of our selfishness, arrogance, prejudice, and ignorance. Too often we do not want to face the uncomfortable truth that injustice today leads to social chaos tomorrow. Or that our children will suffer from our shortsightedness. We get anger as those prophets who call us to embrace justice, wisdom, and righteousness.

Sadly, there are still tyrants, autocrats, and dictators in the world today like Herod Antipas. The rulers of Russia, Iran, Saudia Arabia, N. Korea, and other nations are still killing prophets, but in our days these prophets are called journalists, scientists, and activists who dare to speak up for the poor, weak, and vulnerable. Even in some democratic countries, there are powerful people who try to intimidate and silence the truth sayers and soothsayers because they are afraid folks will listen to them. In his lament over Jerusalem, Jesus tells us that those who silence the prophets will bring doom on themselves and others.

Conclusion

This passage calls to mind the lyrics of a song that was popular long ago; sixty years ago, in fact. Some of you may know the 2016 cover by the band Disturbed. The final verse goes:

And the people bowed and prayed
To the neon god they made.
And the sign flashed out its warning
In the words that it was forming:
Then the sign said, "The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls,
In tenement halls,"
And whispered in the sound of silence.

“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 wings, and you were not willing.” What are modern truth sayers and prophets telling us? Will we listen to modern prophets urging us to turn away from the paths of self-destruction? Will we listen to Jesus and let him guide us on the path to peace?