

“The Heavenly Hen”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
March 13, 2022 – Second Sunday in Lent
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Luke 13:31-35

One moonlit night a Fox was prowling about a farmer’s chicken coop, and saw a Hen roosting high up beyond his reach. “Good news, good news!” the Fox cried to the Hen.

“Why, what is that?” said the Hen.

“King Lion has declared a universal truce. No beast may hurt a bird henceforth, but all shall dwell together in friendship and peace. Come down, and let us celebrate together!”

“Why, that is good news,” said the Hen, still perched high above. “And there I see someone coming, with whom we can share the good tidings,” she said as she craned her neck forward and looked far off.

“Who is it you see?” asked the Fox.

“It is only my master’s Dog that is coming towards us. What, going so soon?” she continued, as the Fox began to turn away. “Will you not stop and congratulate the Dog on the reign of universal peace?”

“I would gladly do so,” said the Fox, now beginning to run, “but I fear he may not have heard of King Lion’s decree.”

What do you think is the moral of Aesop’s fable? Perhaps it is that the ways of sly and cunning tricksters are easily used against them and become their downfall. And there are many old foxes in our world who will eventually learn this lesson the hard way.

Today’s lesson from Luke tells us of one old fox, Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, who was the fearful, wrath-filled despot that was king at the time of Jesus’ birth, and who, 30 years before the events of today’s reading, slyly tried to trick the visiting Magi into telling him in which house exactly the newborn king they were seeking was living, that he might go there too to “worship” this potential rival king. But old fox Herod was outwitted by the Magi, who were warned in a

dream that Herod was up to no good and so did not return to Herod to let him know where he could go to worship baby Jesus as they had, but left for their homeland by another way. But as wrath-filled tyrants often do when outwitted, Herod lashed out in anger and had all the little boys of Bethlehem slaughtered.

And as the apple falls not far from the tree, Herod the Great's son Antipas, was also a sly and cunning, fearful, wrath-filled despot, who was eager to vanquish any that could threaten his hold on power. Not long before the events recounted in today's reading in Luke, Herod Antipas did just that to Jesus' baptizing cousin John, lopping off John's head and then giving to his step-daughter Salome as a gift.

In today's story, some Pharisees come to Jesus to let him know that he's next on Herod's hit list and so maybe he should get lost. Of course, those old foxes the Pharisees wanted him to get lost not because they cared about his well-being or that of his followers, but because they, like Herod, considered Jesus and his movement to be a threat to their own lofty, empowered status, and they wanted to get rid of him one way or another. They especially didn't want to see Jesus going to Jerusalem, the center of religious and political power, where he could royally mess things up for them by upsetting their Roman overlords.

But old foxes motivated by fear neither tricked nor scared Jesus into staying out of Jerusalem. Rather, he set his face to the city, where he would go face-to-face with the powers there. There in Jerusalem, where the prophets who lived before Jesus also went to challenge those who held power over people, Jesus would gather all of the world's people under his loving, protective wings. Like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings in times of danger, protecting them by sacrificing her own body if needed, Jesus, not frozen by fear, would give his body to the old foxes that the chicks might go unharmed and have life.

God the Mama Hen continues to spread her wings over her chicks, providing us with life and peace in the face of all the old foxes that imperil us. And the Heavenly Hen calls us, O church, to follow Christ in spreading our wings over all the other chicks of the earth, unafraid of the foxes, untricked by the tricksters, unwilling to fly away in the face of danger.

We are called to give life, not take it; to grow life, not impede it; to stand against all those who use their power to diminish life in others; and to support all those

everywhere that encourage life to flourish in others. This is the way of the hen, not the way of the fox, and it is to be our way.

This Lent, as we see the colorful, beautiful signs of new and renewed life springing up from the ground below us and sprouting forth from the trees above us, let us work to have the beautiful, life-giving way of God sprout and grow anew in us and from us. Let us remember that the God who created us from the dust of the earth, calls life to come from the lifeless, and creates new possibilities when we face impossible situations. Just as when old Abram and childless Sarai were unable to see a family in their future but trusted that God would give them descendants numbering more the stars, let us trust that God will continue to miraculously create new life in our old and decaying world. Let us have faith the terrible old foxes will not win in the end but that their way of destruction will cause their own ruin. And let us always embrace the better way of living that leads to peace for all God's chicks.

When we live in the way of life and peace, we will know the reign of peace in our hearts as described in this beautiful blessing of Benedictine nun Sister Ruth Marlene Fox:

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships so that you may live deep within your heart. May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people so that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace. May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy. May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world so that you can do what others claim cannot be done...¹

And may the peace of God and the God of peace be with you now and for evermore. Amen.

¹ <http://www.thesacredbraid.com/2016/07/22/a-non-traditional-blessing/>