

**Text:** Luke 13.31-35

**Title:** The Fox and the Hen

**Location:** Community Presbyterian Church, Celebration, FL

**Preacher:** Rev. Nancy Graham Ogne, Associate Pastor & Teaching Elder

**Date:** 28 February 2010



We're in the second Sunday in LENT ... Following Jesus on his INTENTIONAL journey to Jerusalem ... to death and his destiny as the REDEEMING Son of Man. Today's lectionary reading from the Gospels is found in Luke 13.31-35.

### Luke 13.31-35

<sup>31</sup> At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.'  
<sup>32</sup> He said to them, '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. <sup>33</sup>Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem." <sup>34</sup>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! <sup>35</sup>See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." '

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Back in the 1970s – LONG BEFORE Tivo or DVRs arrived on the scene – there were a few nights each year when homes were RIVETED to a single television NETWORK ... when students, particularly, knew that all their classmates were sharing their away-from-school experience.

One of those occasions occurred when *The Charlie Brown Christmas Special* was shown. Another happened on the one night each year when CBS aired the 1939 classic film *The Wizard of Oz*.

This DREAMY account concerns a Kansas farm girl named Dorothy – SMACKED on the head during a cyclone, but WAKING to enter the fanciful, Technicolor world of Oz ... a land of peculiar but friendly little people, called MUNCHKINS ... a MYSTERIOUS ruler, known as THE WIZARD ... scary witches and flying monkeys ... a land TRACED by a YELLOW brick road ... LEADING to an EMERALD city ... walked upon in RUBY slippers.

Throughout the adventure, Dorothy, her little dog Toto and the three friends she collects along the way – the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion – stave off frightening CHARACTERS and LURKING dangers to "follow the yellow brick road" to the place of completion ... which, for Dorothy, looks like a return to Kansas.

The EXPERIENCE grows QUITE SCARY for little people – or, at least it did for us in those days of PRE-*Avatar*<sup>1</sup> special effects – when the SKY grows dark. With Toto at their feet, the four friends LINK ARMS and HUDDLE CLOSER as the YELLOW BRICK ROAD – the very road they're SUPPOSED TO FOLLOW – takes them to the edge of a HAUNTED FOREST.

The Cowardly Lion CLUTCHES his tail and his VOICE trembles as he reads the BAT-SHAPED sign that points the way ahead of them: "Haunted Forest ... Witches [*sic*] Castle 1 Mile ... I'd turn back if I were you!"

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<sup>1</sup> *Avatar*, a 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox film directed by James Cameron, 2009. Many believe *Avatar* has redefined special effects in film.

The LION turns to SCRAM before his friends of TIN and STRAW chase him down, grab him by the ELBOWS and bring him back to FACE the FOREST.

Sitting a world away in our LIVING ROOMS, even if we kids FOUND THE LION a bit annoying at times, most of us UNDERSTOOD his ANXIETY ... *We wouldn't want to go there* ... Too many SPOOKY sounds and SCARY shadows ... Too many KNOWN threats lying in ABEYANCE ...

We weren't sure that WE would have followed that well-lined road – with all its promised certainty – if it meant EXPOSURE and DANGER to things that felt MORE POWERFUL than we were. THROWING OUR YOUNG SELVES into the scene, we appreciated the warning: “I'd turn BACK if I were you!”

Woven into this beloved children's tale is a lesson for all ages: Sometimes the road we're supposed to follow is FROUGHT with danger ... Well meaning others may PAINT BOLD SIGNS or shout from the rafters – or whisper in our ears, “I'd turn back if I were you!” ...

PROBABLY any charitable person would NOD understandingly if we DID turn back ... “Of course,” they'd say – or we HOPE they'd say if WE WERE the people who RETREATED – “Of course, you turned back. You'd had a GLIMPSE of how scary it could be ... BETTER to take no RISKS ... play it safe ... protect yourself ...”

As humans, living in the land of ORLANDO or ATLANTA or MILWAUKEE or DES MOINES, we experience these challenges in tiny and incremental ways, beginning in our early years. TAKE A RISK, or play it safe?

- As children, perhaps, we want to PLAY BALL on an organized team but we're afraid we might get CUT if we try out ... We want to excel at PIANO or DANCE, but the RECITAL comes and we're TERRIFIED to FAIL or be branded ... Approaching the TRY-OUT scrimmage – or the APPOINTED TIME at the recital – we hear the inner voice, “I'd turn back if I were you!” ...
- As teens and young adults, we hear that warning as we consider whether to RISK OUR HEARTS with a significant other or a BEST FRIEND ...
- Later, as we consider whether we'll STAY THE COURSE and HOLD to our ethics – refusing to CHEAT on a test or a business deal or a tax return or a partner – though INTEGRITY means losing a scholarship or a CLIENT or a WINDFALL or some promise of EXCITEMENT ... OUR earnest hope, our COMMITMENT, our CALLING, lies DOWN THIS ROAD – and yet we hear, “I'd turn back if I were you!” ...
- The health challenges of someone we VALUE – or the emotional RISKS of working to save a BROKEN MARRIAGE – will test our STAMINA and DEVOTION ... TO care too much will be COSTLY. We MAY feel EXHAUSTED by the emotional PRICETAG ... What if we POUR OURSELVES out and still LOSE them? It will HURT so much more! ... We hear the SIREN SONG: “I'd turn back if I were you!”

We grasp the INHERENT CHALLENGES of a ROAD that calls us to COMMITMENT ... even if we're children, leaning forward, elbows propped and chin in hand – watching a long-ago tale of FANCIFUL OZ, complete with its PROMISES and FEARS.

For Jesus – METHODICALLY making his way to Jerusalem – the STAKES were SO MUCH HIGHER than any we've experienced in any of those realms.

As Son of God and Son of Humanity, his choices have ETERNAL implications ... AFFECTING not only HIMSELF but the balance of the heavenlies ... all those people in his midst and all those who will follow after.

Four short chapters ago in Luke's narrative, Jesus RESOLUTELY set his face toward Jerusalem. He's HINTED to followers and SPOKEN DIRECTLY ... He intends to go to JERUSALEM to die at the hands of religious authorities.

NOW, the SECT of the Pharisees ... the RELIGIOUS POWER BROKERS who have treated him as NEMESIS in so many situations, arrive – just as Jesus has finished talking about THE NARROW DOOR – that ULTIMATELY, many who CLAIM SPECIAL status with God will NOT be recognized in the KINGDOM.

On the heels of Jesus' sobering statement, the Pharisees bring a PERSONALIZED WARNING: "Depart! Go! Things are going to get rough ... Herod wants to KILL you! Your life is on the line!"

They speak of Herod Antipas, TETRARCH of Galilee and Perea --- who has ruled this WEDGE of the land since 4 BC when his father, Herod the Great, died. The last time we saw Herod's name in this Gospel,<sup>2</sup> we learned that he had already KILLED John the Baptist. John, it seems, had grown a bit too UPPITY – challenging Herod on his marital INFIDELITY. Though Herod feared the people, he KILLED JOHN to fulfill a RECKLESS OATH. Soon after, Luke told us in chapter 9, the RULER was suddenly INTERESTED in Jesus ... wanting to see Jesus! His interest suggests ominous overtones.

It's UNCLEAR whether these Pharisees – the PASSIONATE, well-meaning, religious RIGHT of their day – have Jesus' best interest at heart ... Luke offers no clues about their intention. Yet to this point, these RELIGIOUS LEADERS have found Jesus to be a PEST ... They have REPEATEDLY challenged his authority and theology.

Since Luke doesn't NAME the particular Pharisees – and he doesn't provide CLUES about their MOTIVES – it seems quite POSSIBLE to me that the RELIGIOUS LEADERS are trying to HUSTLE Jesus out of the area ... trying to SQUELCH the energy that SURROUNDS the Teacher – even as in the OLD SOUTH of the United States, proponents of the STATUS QUO tried to silence Martin Luther King and others who challenged the way it had always been.

The religious leaders WARN Jesus that DISASTER is on the way ... Not from THEM, mind you, but from people with political POWER ... After all, Herod's already KILLED JOHN.

"It's going to be DIFFICULT ahead," the Pharisees warn Jesus. "REALLY difficult ... I'd turn back if I were you! ... Go!"

Jesus replies with his own imperative. "You go," he says, "... and tell that FOX that I cast out demons and complete healings today and tomorrow – and the THIRD DAY I finish my work ... On these same days I must be on my WAY ... At a methodical pace – unafraid of POLITICAL or death THREATS ... I am WALKING THROUGH Herod's jurisdiction toward Jerusalem, fulfilling my mission ... because it is IMPOSSIBLE that a prophet would be killed away from Jerusalem."

There may be lions, and tigers, and BEARS out there in the world,<sup>3</sup> but Herod is a FOX ... In some ancient traditions a FOX implies cunning and SLYNESS ... In ancient Jewish tradition – as in Nehemiah<sup>4</sup> – a fox denotes an INSIGNIFICANT DESTROYER<sup>5</sup> ...

Whatever Jesus' connotation, it's NOT complimentary.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 9.7-9

<sup>3</sup> A recurring line in *The Wizard of Oz* as the four friends walk through the Haunted Forest: "Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!"

<sup>4</sup> Nehemiah 4.3. See also Song of Solomon 2.15 regarding "the little foxes that spoil the vineyard."

<sup>5</sup> Mark Strauss, "Luke" in Clinton El Arnold, ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, Vol. 1*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002, p. 449.

Herod, it appears, wants to EXERT POWER in order to KILL and to protect his imagined TURF – but Jesus exerts power for OTHER PEOPLE ... in the Messianic calling, casting out demons ... PERFORMING CURES ... Doing the MIRACULOUS ... Not protecting TURF but BREAKING DOWN BOUNDARIES ... re-defining who's "IN" by drawing a MUCH WIDER CIRCLE of inclusion.

Jesus is not about the business of killing but of bringing LIBERTY and LIFE and WHOLENESS ... and HELP.

In as clear a tone as Jesus has set to this moment, he specifies: "I won't let the THREATS of hatred or DEATH DETER me ... I'm going to die all right ... But in reality, I'm on God's calendar ... I won't RUN FROM IT and I won't RUN toward it ... I'm walking the road I'm called to walk, and it's taking me to Jerusalem. No prophet can perish outside it ...

"I won't be dissuaded from accomplishing my purpose."

At this moment, Jesus SHIFTS his comment to LAMENT ... CRYING out for the people of God while marking a CLEAR LINE of delineation between HIMSELF and HEROD.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... How often have I desired to gather your children together, as a HEN gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

Herod, then, is a STALKING FOX ... but Jesus describes himself as a MOTHER HEN ... Not a predator, but a protector ... Jesus would use HIS POWER to TAKE THE BLOW ... to protect the innocent under his care from the DESTRUCTION of the prowling FOX.

What a contrast of WILLS here ... Herod WILLS to KILL Jesus ... Jesus WILLS to gather and protect the children of FAITH ... The CHILDREN of Jerusalem -- place of his destiny – WILL NOT be gathered nor protected.

What a contrast of leadership styles – a FOX and a HEN.

STILL, despite the warnings, Jesus will NOT TURN BACK. He will STEP FORWARD ... EXTENDING his arms to shield those who would ACCEPT his NURTURING protection.

Jesus will FULFILL his calling. He knows the COST and he will not RUN from the cost of being faithful ... He will not cower when the ROAD GROWS DARK ... when ominous threats LURK near and far. He MODELS the call to OBEDIENCE.

As we follow Jesus – taking the path that God has set before us – we can FULLY EXPECT that there will be seasons when the way grows DENSE with TROUBLE ... When we fear the POWER BROKERS who wish to kill and derail and destroy and protect their turf and keep things like they've always been ...

We can be sure as we follow the road of obedience that CULTURE will shout or whisper ... "Oh, I'd turn back if I were you!" But God will not abandon us on this dark road ... We move forward under his nurturing wing ...

Let's not turn back ... Let's live like we get it!