

Luke 13:31-35

February 28, 2010

South Plains

The Fox In The Hen House

One day a very young and attractive lady approached a preacher after worship. As she shook his hand outside the sanctuary, she looked directly in his eyes and asked, "Why do you use such big words in your sermons?" Two different answers came into the preacher's head. On the one hand, he thought to himself, "Why shouldn't I use big words? I went to school and studied for a long time to learn what those words mean." On the other hand, he thought to himself, "What good are those big words, if people don't understand them?"

Because her question made me think long and hard, here's a sermon with smaller words. But, first a story. You may know this story. It's about a hen who lives on a farm with twelve little chicks, and a fox who lives in the forest near the farm. Everybody has seen chickens, at Easter or at least in the grocery store. They're fat and yummy to eat. Not everybody has seen a fox because foxes are wild and very clever. Some people love foxes because they are beautiful animals with long, bushy tails. Other people, especially farmers, don't like foxes at all because they eat chickens.

The farmer in this story was smart and careful. He built a sturdy hen house where the fox could not get to

the chickens at night. The hen was also smart, especially about one thing in particular. She knew that she must protect her baby chicks, and she knew that the best way to protect them was to make sure they came into the hen house before dark every night. Each of her chicks was different. Some chicks loved to snuggle under the mother hen's wings. They came inside just as soon as the sun would set each night. Other chicks played outside as long as they possibly could, even when it got very dark. Some chicks came when they were called, and others always had to be scolded because they came late night after night.

Every evening, as the sun began to droop in the sky, the mother hen ran around the chicken yard gathering her babies into the hen house. The other hens would shake their heads and cluck, cluck, cluck, "Why don't you come into the hen house yourself before that old fox catches you?" But, she was an experienced old biddy, and she was determined that her chicks would be safe in the hen house that the farmer had built. Every evening, she hurried around the yard until the last one of her chicks was inside. She was happy and the farmer was happy.

This went on until her little chicks had grown into chickens that could take care of themselves. Then, one day, the farmer picked up the hen, petted her feathers to calm her, and chopped off her head so he and his wife could eat fried chicken for Sunday dinner.

When Jesus was living in Galilee, the king was a cruel and dangerous fox. He was not really a fox, he was a man named Herod. Herod was a family man, well sort of a family man. When his wife and her daughter asked him, "Please kill John the Baptist because I don't like what he preaches," that is exactly what Herod did. He chopped off John's head and presented it to his wife on a platter. That was the end of John the Baptist. But, it was not the end of his story. You see, Jesus and John were both preachers. They both preached the same message, "Repent! The kingdom of heaven is near." They were so much alike that some thought they were cousins.

Because this is the season of Lent, one of the ways we are getting ready for Easter is to remember their words, "Repent! The kingdom of heaven is near." To repent means to change your mind and to change your ways. When we repent, we are so sorry for the wrong we have done that we stop doing wrong and start doing what's right. That's what John the Baptist and Jesus both wanted the people to do. If they had been mother hens, they would have been telling their chicks to stop running around the chicken yard at night and to come to their mother in the hen house.

In some ways, the city of Jerusalem in Jesus' time was like that hen house. It was the center of life for the people of Israel. It was the place where God met his people. When Jesus went to Jerusalem, he wanted to gather the people of God to himself and protect them

from danger just the way the hen in the story gathered her chicks to protect them.

The great sadness of Jesus' life was when the people of Jerusalem refused to listen to him when he called. He wanted to teach them God's way. He wanted to save them from danger. Some of the people listened, and some of them changed their lives to become the people God wanted them to be. Unfortunately, the leaders in Jerusalem did not listen. The very people who needed Jesus the most ignored him. In fact, it was the leaders in Jerusalem who decided to kill Jesus because they did not want to hear his message, "Repent! The kingdom of heaven is near."

But, the leaders in Jerusalem were not the only ones who did not like what Jesus said and did. King Herod was worried about Jesus. Jesus was more popular than the king. Herod did not like that. To make matters worse, Herod was worried that Jesus would tell him to repent. Herod was an evil person, and a very bad parent. Someone said it was better to be Herod's pig than to be one of Herod's sons.

So that was the situation around Jesus. The cruel King did not like him. And, most of the people and leaders in Jerusalem would not listen to him. Then, one day, some of the leaders came to Jesus and said, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." That was a serious warning because, remember, King Herod had already killed John the Baptist.

our promises and hurt other people. Watch the TV if you don't believe there's danger all around us. Maybe the biggest danger is wanting things that don't belong to us. Every time I get on the internet, I see things to buy. Somebody is always trying to sell us something. If we are not careful, we will start to covet things we don't have already. "Covet" is not a big word, but it's a big problem. I guess it's always been a big problem because it shows up in the Ten Commandments way back in the Old Testament. Herod wanted to be a big shot. He coveted the attention and fame that Jesus had. The leaders and people in Jerusalem coveted the power that Jesus had when he healed people. Things are no different today. Some people still want to be big shots. Some people want the power Jesus had.

But, people are still not listening to Jesus. And, Jesus is still singing the blues, singing a lament of sadness about the children of God who are in danger, but won't listen.

Albemarle, Albemarle,
How often I wanted to gather your children,
To gather your children together,
Together as a hen gathers her brood,
And you were not willing!

Fluvanna, Louisa, Charlottesville,
How often I wanted to gather your children,
To gather your children together,
As a hen gathers her brood,

But, Jesus was not afraid of Herod. He told them, "Go tell that foxy old king this. "Listen up, Buster. I am healing people and getting rid of their demons today and tomorrow. Every day I'm going down the road, getting closer to Jerusalem. Because if anybody kills me, it's going to happen in Jerusalem."

Then Jesus did something we would find odd. He starts to sing or chant. It's not a song like we would expect to hear. People who use big words call it a lament, which means that Jesus was singing the blues:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
City that kills the prophets,
City that stones the prophets,
City that kills those sent to you.
How often I wanted to gather your children,
To gather your children together,
Together as a hen gathers her brood,
And you were not willing!
Not willing, not willing.

Do you see the picture? Jesus has been going around the country gathering up people as a hen gathers her chicks. Some came and some didn't. The ones who did not come were in danger.

The same thing is happening today. Danger is all around us. Not danger from a fox who wants to eat us up, but danger mostly from what we do to ourselves when we tell lies, steal what does not belong to us, break

And you were not willing!

Barbara Brown Taylor says that if you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you can understand the sadness of Jesus. That's why we observe the season of Lent every year as a solemn reminder of how much Jesus wants to gather us, to protect us. That's why the message of Lent can be so simple that we overlook it. "Repent! The kingdom of God is near."