

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
March 17, 2019
Luke 13:31-35

There may be a spider in your cup, and if you drink without realizing it, you aren't hurt. But if you see the spider and know you have drunk it, you will wretch and heave violently.

I have drunk from the cup, and I know that the spider was in it. Alas, if only I knew less! I'm cursed to be so blessed!

(The Winter's Tale, II.i)

There was a skirmish in my garden. A pile of leaves erupted, upturned. Then I saw it. “It” was a red fox who jumped in the air like a frisky cat playing with a mouse—but it wasn’t a mouse. The fox caught a squirrel. The squirrel momentarily arched its back to escape but the fox, with the squirrel between his teeth, shook his head and the squirrel went limp. The fox trotted triumphantly down the road (needing no audience to glorify or applaud his accomplishment), presumably toward his den. I know from raising chickens that I had to be very careful about predators. My coop was built with a wired screen frame under the ground to keep them from digging in. Birds of all kinds—except the raptors, are vulnerable prey. And their eggs—well, every creature seems to love a good fresh egg. There are many characteristics of predators and prey that make up the natural ecosystem but one characteristic concerns vision. Vision is often the most important sense for the predator and the prey. Have you noticed that a predator's eyes are usually located in front of its head? This gives the animal binocular-type vision. The area that each eye sees overlaps, so the brain receives two slightly different messages about the same scene. This helps a predator determine how far away prey is, how fast it is moving, and affords depth-perception. Some predators rely on more sets of eyes than just one—such as Spiders. These predators have six to eight eyes. Predators which hunt at night have mirror-like structures in the back of their eyes to help them see in the dark. Prey, on the

other hand—like rabbits, small birds, mice, deer, and horses—have eyes on the sides of their heads. A very curious evolutionary difference. Chickens are prey but they can see better in color than humans, can detect and see light and color shades, can move each eye independently, and have a 300-degree field of vision without turning their head. When I had backyard chickens I discovered they could detect a hawk overhead way before I even saw its shadow. Their beady, little yellow eyes—dinosaur eyes I called them—were extraordinary.

Predators and prey. Seeing the world divided in this way, is assumed in today's gospel lesson. When some Pharisees say to Jesus, "Get away from here for Herod wants to kill you" it is assumed that we know about the vicious political world of first century Palestine. Fierce. Ruthless. Violent. Competitive. It was about the survival of the fittest. Herod Antipas was ruler of Galilee and Perea, a client state of the Roman Empire. He was called Tetrarch—he never held the title of King. He was the son of Herod the Great, the Herod referred to in the stories of Jesus' birth. Herod Antipas is known for accounts in the New Testament for his role in the execution of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. In the Gospel of Luke, Pilate initially handed Jesus over to Herod Antipas in whose territory Jesus had been most active. It is Antipas who sent Jesus back to Pilate's court. Predator and prey. Jesus calls Herod a fox—

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.'

"Fox" was no compliment. It was a pejorative term—the name for the perpetrators of violence against the people. Jesus stands up, against the threats and courageously takes

on the role of protector. He stands fast yet he laments the overwhelming odds and circumstances.

*“How often have I desired to gather your children together
as a hen (a bird) gathers her brood under her wings,
and you were not willing!”*

Luke is clear about what is coming. A battle is brewing on the road to Jerusalem. It will be a battle between a fox’s fangs and claws, and Jesus’ own vulnerable wings of mother-like love. Consider yourself warned. It’s not going to be a fair fight. But Jesus is not deterred. Jesus is going to Jerusalem—making his way through cities and villages, teaching as he goes. Jesus and the Pharisees are both on a mission but they seem to be headed in different directions. Jesus is busy healing and giving life.

*“I will leave this place,” he says, “in my own good time,
but only after I have completed the work I was sent to do,
and not before.”*

For Jesus, the end will come, but he is not afraid of Herod. It is Jerusalem over which he laments. He knows what fear and hatred have done to Jerusalem and what it will lead to. Howard Thurman writes,

*“Fear is one of the persistent hounds of hell that dog the footsteps of
the poor, the dispossessed, the disinherited.”*

Jesus knows that fear and hatred *dog* both prey and predator.

To quote Thurman,

Fears are of many kinds—fear of objects, fear of people, fear of the future, fear of nature, fear of the unknown, fear fooled age, fear of disease, and fear of life itself. ... people are hounded by day and harrowed by night because of some fear that lurks ready to spring into action as soon as one is alone, or as soon as the lights go out, or as soon as one's social defenses are temporarily removed. ... For the vast poor, the economically and socially insecure, there is a fear of still a different breed. It is a climate closing in; ... like a fog... nowhere in particular yet everywhere.

Unless. Unless there is a new way.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.”

Fear and hatred. These are the true enemies, “the hounds” that Jesus confronts.

“Hatred,” Thurman defines, often begins in “contact without fellowship, ... without any warmth and fellow-feeling and genuineness.”

“Much of modern life,” Thurman continues, “is so impersonal that there is always opportunity for the seeds of hatred to grow unmolested.”

Fear and hatred—“These are the hounds of hell that dog the footsteps of the poor, the dispossessed, the disinherited.” To lament and to mourn is to recognize and weep over

this condition. But in the weeping, and in the recognizing, and in naming the pain there is a love that overcomes and endures. “*Sometimes we know love by its absence,*” a friend once said. Jesus does not give up on us and does not give up hope. In the absence of justice his hope is strengthened both in faith and resolve, grounding in the purpose, the power and the love of God to redeem. He remembers and lives the Psalm we read today:

*The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom then shall I fear?
the Lord is the strength of my life;
of whom then shall I be afraid?*

Jesus is not afraid. Jesus is not deterred.

Fear and hatred. This is what we have seen again in the events of this week—this time in Christchurch, New Zealand. Forty-nine people killed and 48 wounded in shootings at two mosques—the nation's deadliest attack. The gunman espoused racist and anti-immigrant views. Fear and hatred.

“Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem.”

“Jerusalem” is a universal name for all humanity, for people of every family, language, people, and nations. It is Jesus calling the names of those with their “backs against the wall”—as Dr. Thurman says —the poor, the dispossessed, the disinherited, the names of those who were killed, also your name and mine. Jesus weeps over the one who did the killing, predators—grieving over us all, loving each of us, wanting us to love one another. And when we don’t, he steps up to protect us from each other. Jesus weeps and laments when we do not love, respect and advocate for the dignity of every human being.

“Oh, Jerusalem. Jerusalem.”

Like a mother crying at night for her children, or a father watching through the window

in silence, Jesus prays for the redemption of Jerusalem—for all of us. He is not afraid. He is not deterred. And he does not lose hope. Not even the power of death will stop him.

“Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem.”

There’s a odd little piece in Shakespeare’s “The Winter’s Tale” I want to examine with you. Act 2, Scene 1. It seems apropos. Specific to the play it is about a particular character’s irrational jealousy, but in general, it is also the results of seeing circumstances as they really are—seeing harsh reality.

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Alas, if only I knew less! I’m cursed to be so blessed!*

(The Winter’s Tale, II.i)

I know it is painful to watch or read the news these days. I’ve heard many people say they have had enough. It may seem less painful just to turn it off or to isolate ourselves from the circumstances which frighten or disgust us. Lately it seems as if “the cup” has not just one spider, but a nest—a clutter or a cluster of predatorial spiders. Still it’s best to look and see—in order to be cautious and protective of one another—like birds with their 300-degrees sight. It takes courage to see the spider! Our prayers and laments are like wings of love. Jesus laments over the struggles of the poor, the immigrant, the homeless, the needy, and the hungry. He laments over those who are marginalized. He laments over those who are considered unacceptable. He laments over all of us and our human condition, especially when we fail to love.

“Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem.”

AMEN.