

Luke 13:31-35
2/21/16—Lent 2C

Psalm 27:1, 4-5, 7-8, 10, 13-14
Philippians 3:17—4:1

Persistence

I think that every culture has its own rich store of folk songs and ballads that tell a story. And ours is no exception. Some of you may remember how popular folk music was in the nineteen-sixties. Back in the day, I had some friends who played guitar. And sometimes, on their guitars, they used to play this song about a fox who goes looking for a poultry dinner. The song's lyrics go something like this.

“Oh, the fox went out on a chilly night / And he prayed for the moon to give him light / For he'd many a mile to go that night / Before he reached the town—o / He'd many a mile to go that night...”

This fox in the song keeps on going until he finds what he's looking for. He doesn't turn back. He doesn't give up. He's one persistent fox!

Now we usually think of foxes as sly, cunning, crafty critters. In today's reading from Luke's Gospel, Jesus refers to Herod as “that fox.” It's not a complimentary term. Herod, ruler of Galilee, has imprisoned and then executed Jesus' cousin, John. But

Herod's not finished. Apparently, he's determined to eliminate *all* of these prophetic preachers with their subversive messages.

Herod finds them annoying—especially this latest one who proclaims a kingdom that Herod sees as a threat to his *own* power. Herod's determined to get rid of *Jesus*, too.

At least, that's what some Pharisees report to Jesus. *Rabbi, you need to get outta Dodge*, they warn. *Herod's put a price on your head*. Now we know that almost since the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the Pharisees have been trying to cause trouble for him. So we need to be careful about thinking that they've had a change of heart; that they've suddenly become concerned about Jesus' well-being and want to help him get out of harm's way.

Probably, what these Pharisees want most is to get Jesus out of *their* way. These religious leaders are heavily invested in structures and systems that maintain their *own* position, power, and prestige. Their practices don't line up with the teachings of Jesus. And they don't look favorably on Jesus' critique of those practices. The Pharisees—like Herod—are persistent in wanting Jesus to disappear.

And Jesus *will* leave that place. However—his departure won't be on the Pharisees' timetable, but on his own. His death

won't be at Herod's hand, but in the fullness of God's time. Jesus lets those Pharisees know that he's *soooo* not interested in that bothersome two-bit despot Herod. Jesus says: *You go tell Herod I don't have time for him. I've got work to do. And miles to travel. To that capital of power that sets its own standards and eliminates those who don't conform. To Jerusalem. To the city that kills prophets.*

The city toward which Jesus has already set out on a fateful journey. Earlier in Luke's Gospel, we've learned that Jesus has *set his face to go to Jerusalem*. That he's had to *set [his] face like flint*. You know, I think these words are in the Scriptures for a reason. These words remind us that summoning the resolve to make this journey isn't easy for this One who is fully human. You and I need to understand that continuing to put one foot in front of the other—with each step bringing suffering and death ever-closer—is the most difficult thing Jesus has ever done. He knows full well what lies ahead for him.

But he doesn't turn around. For Jesus, there *is* no turning back. He keeps on going. Going to the place where he'll complete his mission. Going to the place where he'll fulfill his purpose.

Going to the place where he'll finish his work. Going to Jerusalem.

Where he'll be mocked. Where he'll be scorned. Where his own people will reject him. But they are not the only ones! My brothers and sisters, for two thousand years, people have been rejecting Jesus. People from all times and places. People from all walks of life. Still today, some choose not to accept the measureless grace of Jesus Christ.

Tragically—as Paul points out—some choose instead to worship the gods of self-satisfaction and instant gratification. Choose to live in and for the moment and to turn away from the only One who can save. Choose not to *run* to the only One who can save.

If you've ever spent any time around chickens, you know that at the first sign of danger, baby chicks all *run* toward the mother hen. Instinctively, they know that she's the only one who can keep them safe.

Brood hens will give their lives to protect their young. The lifeless bodies of brood hens have been found on the nest, with live, healthy chicks underneath them. When disaster struck, the

hen could easily have escaped. But her chicks could not. She chose to die so her little ones could live.

And that's just how it is with Jesus.

In this Sunday's reading, he laments. We picture him weeping. But his sorrow isn't for himself. Jesus laments over those who refuse to come to him. His loving heart grieves for all of those who are unwilling to accept his invitation. The tears of Jesus are for all of those who will be easy prey for the foxes of this world.

Because he yearns, just like a mother hen with her brood, to offer protection. He yearns to offer shelter. He yearns to offer deliverance. This persistent longing of Jesus reveals the nature and the character of God.

Now, most of us have been taught to think of God as Father. But I think that one of Scripture's messages for us is that there are to be no limits to the ways in which we understand God.

The Bible, both in the Old Testament and here in the New, also gives us motherly images of God. A God who nurtures. A God who cares deeply. A God who is all compassion. A God who is our hiding place. The psalmist sings of God's beauty. Sings of

God's goodness. Sings of the One who covers us with God's never-ending love.

How can we not trust in such a faithful God? From such a faithful God, how can we not receive courage and strength for the journey ahead?

In these days of Lent, Jesus calls us to follow him more closely. Jesus calls us to keep going and not turn back. Jesus calls us to keep going even if no others go with us. Jesus calls us to keep going, with the world behind us and the cross before us. Jesus calls us to keep on keeping on. Jesus calls us to be his body in this world. Jesus calls us to continue the work that he's told us he came to do. Jesus calls us to persevere in his way.

If there's someone you walk alongside, someone you help be rid of the demons that torment them, you're persevering in the way of Jesus. If there's someone you sit with and talk with and listen to and offer healing presence and comfort to, you're persevering in the way of Jesus. If you're a friend to the friendless, you're persevering in the way of Jesus. If you offer help to the helpless and hope to the hopeless, you're persevering in the way of Jesus.

For God in Christ Jesus has a desperate longing for all of us hopeless human creatures. God in Christ Jesus *has to have* us. God in Christ Jesus is determined to reach us. God in Christ Jesus is relentless in pursuing us. God in Christ Jesus persists in saving us. God in Christ Jesus never gives up!

Jesus has never given up. He still stands up to all the foxes of today's world. He stands firm against every fox that would snatch you away. He stands firm against every fox that would do you harm. And Paul encourages believers in Philippi—and encourages believers in this twenty-first century—to stand firm, too. To not waver. To stand firm for the Lord Jesus even as he stands firm for you.

For in Jerusalem, on a Friday, he stretches his arms out wide. He spreads his wings. He invites you under the shelter of his wings. Into the protection and the deliverance of his wings. On Calvary's hill, he accomplishes his goal. On the third day, he finishes his work. He gathers his little ones to himself. Forever!

In the name of God the Creator, God the Christ, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.