

Sample Sermon: “Christ the Hen” By Scott Hoezee

When I was a kid in the early 1970s, Saturday night meant watching my favorite TV show, *Emergency!* I loved that show about two brave paramedics from Squad 51 of the Los Angeles Fire Department. When Johnny and Roy were in danger, my pulse raced. Thanks to my father, who was a real-life volunteer fireman at the time, I even got an old fireman’s helmet and painted a “51” on it so it would match Johnny’s helmet. But I remember that one week on a Saturday night my parents went to visit with some friends in Holland, Michigan, and they took my brother and me along. The children of our friends were not accustomed to watching *Emergency!* and so come 8pm that night, they turned on another show. So I told them that my parents did not allow me to watch that particular show and so we should not have it on. The other kids relented and soon I was nicely ensconced in front of their TV watching my heroes Johnny and Roy.

As it happened, it was not true that my parents did not allow me to watch that other show. I don’t want to say I lied exactly. It was more of what Winston Churchill once called “a terminological inexactitude.” But to hide my true motivation, I made up something that pointed to an authority figure whose influence would steer things my direction. “If we do this, you’ll have to deal with my parents,” I claimed.

I think that something exactly like that was behind the Pharisees’ words to Jesus warning about Herod’s alleged plans to harm him. When we read this passage from Luke 13 a few moments ago, it should have struck you as vaguely surprising to see the Pharisees, of all people, huddling around Jesus so as to protect him from harm. After all, Jesus and the Pharisees did not exactly see eye to eye on most things. What’s more, we’re not too far away in Luke’s gospel from a time when the Pharisees will serve as Herod’s *cheerleaders* in not just roughing Jesus up but actually executing him! So when we read that the Pharisees appear to be protecting Jesus in Luke 13, we have to conclude that either Jesus had finally run into a group of kinder, gentler Pharisees or that something else is going on.

I think something else is going on and I suspect it’s something devious. My hunch is that whether or not Herod was really taking note of Jesus and planning some harm for him, the Pharisees mention this to Jesus only as a way to get rid of him. In truth, it wasn’t Herod who wanted Jesus out of Jerusalem, it was the Pharisees, the religious establishment. Jesus threatened so much of what the Pharisees stood for, as you can see in earlier parts of even this very chapter. He cozied up to the very sinners and tax collectors whom the Pharisees shunned. He told stories that, despite being a little hard to figure out, surely seemed to paint religious leaders in a bad light. In fact, the closer Jesus got to Jerusalem and to the very center of the Temple establishment, the more threatened the Pharisees felt. Bad enough that Jesus caused a ruckus out in the sticks in Capernaum and Galilee but they could not afford to have him within the perimeter of the Temple. That would strike too close to home. “Better get out of here,” they said, “Herod means you harm.” But it was the harm Jesus could cause to *them* that was their real concern.

In reply to this, Jesus says that although Herod is something of a fox, he wasn’t going to let Herod chase him away or cause his work to cease. Twice in this passage Jesus refers to a three-day span of time—“Today and tomorrow and the next day”—which is a very Jewish way of referring to a significant event. Any time in the Bible where you read that such-and-such an event took three days, with the culmination occurring on the third day, you know it is something deeply meaningful. At this point in Luke 13 Jesus is not yet referring directly to his resurrection on the third day but seems to be saying that the whole course of his ministry bears such a huge significance that no one—not Herod, not the Pharisees, not the forces of hell itself—will ever derail him. Jesus never stops.

And no sooner did Jesus say that and he goes on to reveal a key reason why he would never stop: he has a heart as big as all creation. Jesus looks at Jerusalem, and his heart breaks. The Pharisees’ attempt to chase Jesus off only added to the sadness Jesus felt for God’s children. He was coming to Jerusalem to fulfill a ministry that would offer salvation by grace to all. But the closer he gets to it, the more people try to wave him off or chase him away. Indeed, when Jesus says in verse 32 that he will soon reach his goal, that word in the Greek is the word that means “to fulfill” or “to complete.” The goal

Jesus has is not some artificial finish line. Jesus' goal is the salvaging of all creation.

But the closer he gets to that goal, the more Herod the fox and those foxy Pharisees try to chase him away. Since he's surrounded by foxes anyway, Jesus decides to make the apt move of calling himself a mother hen. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I have longed to gather your chicks under my wings!" Jesus never stops calling God's little ones to come to him, to come under the wings of his grace and salvation. He never stops. But the world keeps trying to stop him and sometimes, alas, the most religious people in the world try to stop him, too.

To get their own way, the Pharisees pointed the finger at a secular figure like Herod, using his alleged threat to advance their own agenda. But the result was a fox-like chasing away of Jesus. It seems like sometimes today some in the church make this same move. How often don't we hear loud cries from some church leaders about the threat represented by such-and-such a political figure, by this or that organization, by the so-called "culture war" or "the war on Christmas." Some keep saying that it's the people "out there" who are the problem. But sometimes the longer and louder we say that, the more people "out there" feel like we don't want them "in here." And maybe that's partly true. By going on and on about this world's Herods, maybe what we're really trying to do is keep Jesus all to ourselves by chasing away those we're not sure about inviting in.

Maybe Herod really was making noises about roughing up Jesus. Maybe. But it wasn't Herod who ultimately made sure that Jesus got hoisted up on a cross. That grim task was taken up by the Pharisees and their ilk. They were the ones who made sure that the dear chicks whom Jesus wished to take under his loving wing never got anywhere near Jesus. The Pharisees were the ones who made sure that Jesus was made into such an ugly public spectacle that people hid their faces from him, whisked their children out of the way so they would not have to look upon the horror Jesus became.

But Jesus never stops. He never stops calling us to himself. He never stops lamenting all the lost "chicks" out there and he wants them to come under the protection of his wings. What we should want more than anything is to help people hear the gracious invitation that comes ever and again from Christ the Hen. But do we? Do we make Jesus and his grace the focus of our energies and public testimonies or do we tend more often to rail against our enemies and all those who disagree with us? When people listen closely to us, do they hear us waxing eloquent about Jesus and his love or complaining that science or the media or the government are out to get us?

These are not easy things for us to ponder. But then, Lent is a time to think about hard things. Lent is a time to see ourselves as the people who contributed to Jesus' pain, as the ones for whose sins Jesus died. And so Lent is a time to re-double our determination to leave our sins behind and stay in step with the Spirit as a response to the wonderful grace of Jesus that has caught up every one of us despite our ugliness, despite our sins, yes, despite even our attempts to prevent Jesus from doing what he came into this world to do; namely, to call all people unto himself.

As Luke 13 shows us, despite everything, Jesus never stops. This Lenten evening, we have the wonderful chance to see another example of that non-stop ministry of grace as Jesus calls you, calls me, call all of us to his sacred table again. Once again this evening, we are called to go under the wings of Christ the Hen. And that's really just another way of saying that we are being called home.

At a conference on the sacraments in early January, Bishop N.T. Wright noted that according to John Calvin's theology, what happens to us in the Lord's Supper is that we really are elevated into the presence of Christ. Space, time, and matter coalesce in a deep mystery in which we really do go home to where Christ is at the right hand of the Father. We really do come under his wings this very night. For now, we do not remain there, but we glimpse and experience again the home that has been prepared for us by grace.

It's a glorious thing to be a chick under Jesus' wings. It's a glorious thing to know we have this home. That's why those of us who this night are blessed to be brought home to Christ the Hen need to go forth from this table to do all that we can to repent of any tendencies we have to chase chicks away from Jesus and to do all that we can to make sure that Jesus' soulful, compassionate, deeply loving invitation to gather God's chicks to himself is heard loud and clear by our neighbors, our coworkers, our friends, our family.

The gospels tell us that the moment Jesus began his public ministry, he found himself in the wilderness being confronted by the devil. Jesus' ministry wasn't five minutes old before someone tried to stop him. The opposition never relented. But Jesus never stops. Foxes abound in Jesus' chicken coop. But Jesus never stops. He never stops. And so this night he calls you and me to this table. Tomorrow he wants to use us to call still more to join us at this table in the future. He never stops.