

“Foxes Have Dens; Not So the Son of Man”

(an Ash Wednesday sermon based on Luke 9:43-58, page 70 in the New Testament, NRSV pew Bible)

by

Rev. Dr. Paul A. Lance, Pastor
Seaside Community Church (United Church of Christ)
22940 Ocean Avenue, Torrance, California 90505

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“A fox went out on a chilly night, and he prayed to the moon for to give him light. He had many a mile to go that night before he reached the town-o.” Burl Ives used to sing that old folksong, and I learned it as a child. I always *felt sorry* for that fox, trying to find a chicken coop to plunder, or to get into town *unseen*, since all the farmers & villagers were *out to get him*, trap him, shoot him, shoo him away from their livelihood, their neighborhood. Poor fox!

There were foxes in Palestine, and *several species still exist* despite the rampant *construction* of the Jewish settlement of Israel and the wide-spread *destruction* due to the perpetual state of *war* among the native Palestinians. Twice in the Gospel of Luke Jesus refers to “foxes.” One of my commentaries (*Cruden’s Complete Concordance*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968, page 236) points out with complete seriousness: “*It is impossible to decide with certainty in any particular case which species is intended, if it is not the jackal.*” You see, the Hebrew word “Shual” is used not only for the *fox*, but also for the *jackal*... which is *not a fox* at all but really belongs to the *dog* family!

Jackals, like coyotes, were much more numerous than foxes, and (unlike foxes), jackals run in packs. *Jackals are like wild dogs*, roaming as much in the day as in the moonlit night. The poor fox, associated in popular imagination with such mongrels! Jackals were more easily seen, more easily captured, many mutts the lot of them! Foxes, on the other hand, are *sleek* and *bushy tailed*, with a reputation of being *sly*, clever, *sneaky*... hard to pin down.

Today’s story was the *first instance* when Jesus speaks of a “fox.” He points out to a prospective disciple that “*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests. But the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*”

The fox can *hide out* in her den during the day -- safe and cool under ground or in the empty trunk of a fallen tree. The fox can rest between capers, waiting for the moonlight and the cover of darkness before going on the hunt. *Jesus has no place to hide out*, no place to settle down, *no where to rest* his head as they were going along the road, through Samaria, and on to Jerusalem.

A few sentences earlier in the Gospel of Luke, we read that “*While everyone was amazed at all that he was doing, Jesus said to his disciples: “Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.” But they did not understand this saying... [writes Luke]... and they were afraid to ask him about it.*” (Luke 9:43-45) And it was after this – when the days drew near for him to be taken up – he set his face to go to Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51) Jesus is on the way to the Cross!

The disciples are afraid and they are unsure, *unsettled*. So it's no surprise when the Samaritans *reject* them, *refuse hospitality* to Jesus and his disciples, that *James and John explode!* They want to "*command fire to come down from heaven and consume them!*" Napalm their village! Teach them a lesson! But Jesus *rebukes them*, chews them out, and leaves the Samaritans in peace.

The disciples are shaken, *upset*, angry, *hurt!* They don't like where they are heading, and they are afraid to ask Jesus about it. In fact, every time they *do* ask Jesus a question, they seem to get it *wrong!* For example (in verse 46), they are arguing among themselves as to which of them is the *greatest*. But Jesus turns his back on all of *them*, and took (instead) *a little child* and put her by his side, and said to them: "*Whoever welcomes this child in my name, wel-comes me... and the one who sent me. For the least among all of you is the greatest.*" (*Huh?* What does Jesus mean by *that!?* Some anonymous little child *who's done nothing* is a greater disciple than *Jesus' famous Twelve?*) The disciples only add *more confusion* to their arguing & their anger & fear.

For another example (v. 49), John steps forward to show how zealously he has been defending Jesus and their movement: "*Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us!*" (Yeah! "*Either your with us, or you'r agin' us!*" Right?)

Wrong! Jesus rebukes John, saying: "*Do not stop him. For whoever is not against you is for you!*" (Luke 9:50) You got it all exactly backwards, John!

They do *not* understand him. They do not propose *anything* that Jesus can go along with. The disciples are getting one *rebuke* after another, one *cor-rection* after another. And then this *rejection* by the Samaritans, and Jesus just keeps on walking, ever nearer to Jerusalem and to his pending *betrayal*. Something about which the disciples are *afraid to ask him*. What a sad story!

It is just then that someone comes up to Jesus and says: "*I'm ready. Take me. I will follow you wherever you go.*" And where is Jesus going? *Foxes have dens*, birds have nests, but Jesus has *no where* to lay his head.

The second time Jesus speaks of a fox, he has nearly arrived in Jerusalem. It's in Luke Chapter 13. "At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." (Luke 13:1) That's a poetic way of saying that Roman guards (soldiers charged by Governor Pilate to keep the peace) had charged a group of Galileans who had come to Jerusalem – zealous nationalists, who were presumably rallying an insurgency within the Temple – and killed them. A bloody clash within the Temple during the Passover festival, was entirely in keeping with Pontius Pilate's known character. (He was a *jackal*, a mean dog.) Maybe *if Jesus knows about this*, he will *not* lead his disciples into danger.

But Jesus dismisses the threat of the Roman governor and his troops. He *keeps coming* toward Jerusalem and the confrontation which would follow. In verse 31 we read: "*At that very hour, some Pharisees came and said to him: 'Get away from here, for Herod (the king) wants to kill you.'*" To which Jesus replied: "*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.*" He was going to stay on track, relentlessly, regardless of the danger.

Jesus is not afraid of the King's threat any more than of the Romans. If the Romans were wild dogs, jackals, *the king is a fox... wicked and wiley.*

When he finally arrived in Jerusalem (in Luke, Chapter 20), Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there. And he said, “*It is written: My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers.*” (Luke 19: 45-46) That is actually a third reference to *a fox’s lair*. When Jesus says the people in charge of the Temple – the priests, and the Roman soldiers, and the King’s henchmen alike – are a *den* of robbers, that’s where *a fox lives*. The *hole* in which the fox finds safety; the *lair* in which they lay down their heads, *is a “den.”* So, the Holy Place that Jesus once called “*My Father’s House*” when he was twelve years old (Luke 2:41-50), appears now to be *a fox’s den*, a safe *hideout* for *robbers*.

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Jesus has had about all of this that he can stand. After he cleared the Temple of its merchants, he settled down there and began to teach. Luke says: “Every day he was teaching in the Temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him.” (Luke 19:47) Apparently, in the end, Jesus has found a place to rest his head... He has arrived *in his Father’s House*, the “house of prayer.”

Luke says that “*Every day he was teaching in the Temple, and at night he would go out and spend the night on the Mount of Olives, as it was called (“Olivet” – camping out in the Garden of Gethsemane).*” (Luke 21:37)

Lent begins tonight... the 40-day journey of Jesus to Jerusalem. He is *on the way* to confront the powers that be, and to usher in a New Kingdom: the Realm of God. *Foxes have dens, birds have nests*, but this Son of Man (Jesus) will find no place to call home, until he is at last in his Father’s House. Our final service in Lent will be next month on *Maundy Thursday*, when (as a church, representing his disciples) we will take communion with Jesus one last time before he is crucified. And then we will go out with him into the night, into Gethsemane, under the olive trees, where he *finally laid down* his head.