

The Fox and the Hen
Luke 13:31-35
March 4, 2007

The longer I live the less I chalk things up to coincidence and the more I look for the providence of God working quietly in and through the people and events in our lives. So I've been asking myself for the last several days, is it just coincidence that Charlie was baptized last Sunday and Ruby this Sunday, and that these two Sundays also happen to be the first two Sundays in the season of Lent? Or, might it be that God is trying to tell us something in this convergence of events? Give us a little nudge? I choose the latter interpretation. Since we are beginning Lent this year with two baptisms, it is an opportune time, perhaps a God-chosen time, for us to consider in the days leading up to Easter what it means to be baptized and what it means to live out our baptism.

When Jesus was baptized, he heard the voice of God saying, "You are my Son, my beloved. In you I am well pleased." And after his baptism, Jesus was a different person. There was no going back. He faced temptation, he called disciples, he preached, taught, and healed; he held before his followers a vision of the kingdom of God, very different from the oppressive system under which they were living. It was only a matter of time then before he attracted the attention of the political powers. King Herod, who held his position by cooperating with the Roman occupiers, had his eye on Jesus. Herod had already executed Jesus' cousin John for preaching against him. And now, Jesus was stirring up the people with his "kingdom" talk. Before long, Jesus would be arrested too, and not just privately beheaded somewhere in Herod's dungeons, but publicly crucified before the gathered Jerusalem population to say to everyone, "This is what happens when you stand up to the Roman empire. This is what happens when you preach that there is a power greater than Caesar."

In today's lesson, the Pharisees, usually considered to be enemies of Jesus, warn him that Herod is after him and that Jesus should get away quickly. But Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and will not be dissuaded by the threat of death. He tells them, "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.'" Calling one's political leader a "fox" is probably not the best way to ensure safety and security, but Jesus wasn't about to acknowledge that Herod was the final authority in his life. Indeed, his ultimate allegiance was to the God of his baptism, the one who had named and claimed him, called him beloved Son.

Against the threat of Herod's power, Jesus speaks of a "hen gathering her brood under her wings." Why a hen? We all know that in a contest the fox will win over the hen. The hen will be overcome by the violence and greater strength of the fox. We'd probably all prefer that Jesus describe himself as a farmer with a shotgun who will blast the fox to smithereens, rather than a mother hen who passively protects her baby chicks by spreading her protective wings over them.

But Jesus is not a "shot gun" messiah. He'd already decided not to meet violence with violence; force with force. To do so would have been to sell his soul to the devil. Instead, he visualizes himself meeting the force of Herod with the sacrificing love of the mother hen, who in effect says to the fox, "to get my chicks, you'll have to kill me first."

Jesus knows, that even in offering his life to protect, defend, save and support his followers, there are those who won't trust his support, and will run away, seeking to preserve themselves and forgetting about the others. But that doesn't stop him; he does it anyway.

Jesus didn't run away from confrontation, he chose a path of non-violence, and he didn't flinch from the ultimate consequences of his actions. Why? Perhaps it was because he was living out his baptism; because in his baptism Jesus had given his ultimate loyalty to God;

because in baptism, he recognized and affirmed the equality of all God's people with whom he had chosen to stand in community?

Well, if that's the case, I'll ask the same question I asked last week. "What have we gotten this baby into?" What have we signed Ruby up for? What have we committed her life to and our lives to? Ruby has now been claimed by God. God has spoken, "This is my daughter in whom I am well pleased." And as God's daughter, there is a different path now for Ruby to walk that before, a path that Jesus walked, a path that Jesus now guides and leads us on.

In his baptism, Jesus saw the world differently – he saw a new social order, a new kind of community – not one based on wealth and privilege, or power and force, but on love and grace. He treated everyone equally, he ate with tax collectors and sinners as well as with Pharisees; he offered the grace of God to the rich young ruler, and to the blind beggar Bartimaeus. He healed the bent over woman, and the Syrophonecian woman's daughter. He invited children to come close to him, and forbid his disciples from restraining them. He told story after story about the last being first and the first being last in the kingdom of God. And, of course, that kind of talk will get you into trouble every time.

Baptism has been called the sacrament of justice and equality, where the worth and value of each individual is recognized and made holy. It is administered equally to all persons and transcends all of our human distinctions, the good ones and the bad ones (James White, *The Sacraments as God's Self-Giving*, p. 99.) It doesn't matter if you went to the University of Georgia or the University of Florida. It doesn't matter if you are a Republican or a Democrat, a liberal or a conservative, right handed or left handed, blue-eyed or brown-eyed. It doesn't matter if you have a Ph.D. or you dropped out of school in the 6th grade. It doesn't matter if you're young or old, rich or poor. Your nationality doesn't matter; your race doesn't matter; your gender doesn't matter; your sexual orientation doesn't matter. In baptism we all pass through the same waters and are initiated into the same body, the body of Christ. Paul writes in Galatians, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:27-28)

I didn't grow up that way, even though, like Ruby, I was baptized as an infant. I grew up in a segregated south. All I knew was "separate but equal." I thought that was the way the world was supposed to be. And then I heard the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy and I saw the possibility of a new community. To live out my baptism meant tearing down the dividing walls the world had erected, and reaching out to my brothers and sisters in Christ. We want Ruby to grow up without prejudice – to know that as a child of God she is sister to many others who may not look like her, or talk like her, or live anywhere near her or have the same customs and culture that she does, and yet they are joined to her in one family, the family of God.

Baptism is also the sacrament of peace. Jesus preached and lived non-violence. He taught "if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." (Matt. 5:39) He said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matt. 5:44). When he was arrested, he told Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom was from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. . . ." (John 18:30) Jesus knew that if we fight evil with evil, then evil wins; and all that is left is evil. This is a hard lesson because when we're threatened in any way because our first instinct is to strike back. Sometimes we can be so frightened that we strike first.

But that is not Christ's way. Christ's way is the way of the mother hen – loving, protecting, and if need be, sacrificing. In the words of St. Francis' prayer, we want Ruby to grow up to be an instrument of God's peace – where there is hatred, to sew love, where there is injury,

pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light, and where there is sadness, joy.

In a time when the foxes of the world seek to divide and separate, there has never been a greater need for the spirit of the gathering mother hen, creating unity, promoting peace, offering consolation, understanding, and love, sacrificing when necessary for the good of others. This truly is not just what we want and expect only for Ruby, but for ourselves as well as we each live out the vows made at our baptism.

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