

Lent 2c – February 28, 2010

Once when I was younger – nowhere near being “pastor Eleanor” yet – younger *and in love*, I went out to my parked car and found a note on the windshield in the handwriting of my honey. It was one word: “Fox.” I smiled for the rest of the day. Under the circumstances, it was a term of endearment. I was Eleanor the Fox, and it was // sweet!

Others of you have been *complimented* by being called “Fox,” I’m sure. But in the mouth of Jesus and referring to Herod Antipas, Fox was not a compliment; it was an insult. What Jesus meant exactly, I’m not sure. Foxes – not the sexy, desirable kind -- are noted for being clever and cunning, varmints on the order of Wile E. Coyote. Foxes will eat fruit from a vine, they will eat garbage from your kitchen; but they like meat and they hunt to get it – could be a rabbit in your garden, a sparrow at your birdfeeder, a kitten in the barn. Foxes are predators. Maybe that was on Jesus’ mind when some Pharisees told him to move along, get away: ‘Herod wants to kill you.’

An association I have with foxes is the old folk song about the fox going out on a chilly night, praying for the moon to give him light; for he’d many a mile to go that night before he reached the town-o. When he reaches the farmer’s pen (where the ducks and the geese are kept therein), he says, “A couple of you will grease my chin before I leave this town-o.”

(Do you know the song?) *He grabbed the gray goose by the neck, threw a duck across his back. He didn’t mind their quack, quack, quack, and their legs all dangling down-o.* Despite Old Mother Flipper Flapper jumping out of bed and sending John out after him, the fox gets back to his den and feeds his family. *They never had such a supper in their life, and the little ones chewed on the bones-o.*

It's a folk song (and a children's book) that gives substance to the saying about the "fox in the hen house." The fox in the hen house is bad news for the chickens. And listen to Jesus here: it's the chickens he has first in his mind -- not the fox.

"Go and tell that Fox I am about my work." (His work is healing and exorcism.) "Then I must be on my way to Jerusalem, where prophets are killed," Jerusalem, where he will come face to face with the fox. Jesus identifies Herod as a fox after some Pharisees say Herod is out to get him. But if Jesus is the prey, there are lots of predators sniffing his blood. The Pharisees themselves can't be counted on to have his best interest at heart. *Maybe* these ones did. Maybe they just want to scare him away from their territory, the troublemaker. A little earlier in the story, "The scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile toward him and to cross-examine him about many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say." "Hostile, lying in wait, to catch him:" the Pharisees had a kind of foxiness that was nothing to do with the sweet note on my wind-shield or genuine concern for the well-being of Jesus.

So 1) Herod is a fox. Having already killed John the Baptist, he now poses a threat to Jesus. 2) The Pharisees, whether these particular ones or others, are predators. And there is 3) Jerusalem itself: "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it." In this part of the story, Jesus has "set his face toward Jerusalem," a predatory *city!* Foxes usually hunt alone; but here they appear to be circling ever more tightly around Jesus. And knowing it, he keeps walking to the city // toward arrest, trial, and a crowd shouting "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Jesus takes on the foxes in the hen house // for the sake of *the chicks* in the hen house.

If we have some idea who the foxes are in the story and how ready Jesus is to take them on, who are we in the story? The heart wants to answer that we are the chicks, of course. Jesus loves us and wants to protect us, keeping us warm and safe

under his wings the way a mother hen does with her brood. // But as we come closer and closer to Calvary and Jesus' crucifixion, we recognize that we are not as innocent and adorable as the Easter chicks we buy as pets, see on our greeting cards, and find in our Easter baskets.

There is a part of us that is as shocked by Jesus as the Pharisees were. His disregard of some religious laws seems a disregard of common decency -- blatantly violating the Sabbath, blatantly associating with bad company. You and I are capable of being self-righteous and judgmental just like the Pharisees were. And we are capable of shouting "crucify, crucify" with the crowds. (We will shout it on Passion Sunday!) Jesus can be too shocking and demanding for us sometimes. Much as we hate to admit it, we can be what St. Paul calls "enemies of the cross" in the second lesson -- enemies who think we're just fine on our own and don't really need saving.

Imagine being a chick under the wing of our mother hen and pecking at her, picking at her with a little of that coyote spirit that makes enemies of the cross insist -- and I have a T-shirt that says this -- "Chicks Rule." Even in the wonderful image of being comforted, protected (saved) by Jesus our mother we recognize that the fox is not always outside of us, but within us. That we can be forgiven for being so double minded (sometimes the chick nestling under the wing and sometimes the fox tearing at the wing) is the reason Jesus comes to the hen house in the first place. Jesus will save us from ourselves as well as from dangerous predators, going willingly to the cross where we ourselves have nailed him with our sin. At the cross, Jesus outfoxes the fox in us, and chicks at their most vulnerable know their need of a savior. Christ gives his life for the chicks. At the cross for the sake of the chicks, Christ rules.