

Luke 13:31-35

Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to 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. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

One of my favorite questions to ask young children is, who is your favorite Disney or Pixar character? There is often a difference in how boys and girls answer. Boys often default to Buzz Lightyear, Woody, lightning McQueen, maybe even Simba. Girls will often list their favorite princess. There are a lot of Belles, Tiana's, Merida's, and Cinderella fans in our world.

In my pop culture world of snarkier adults I often ask who is your favorite Disney villain. To me that question is far more interesting. On any given day my favorite villain fluctuates between Ursula from little mermaid and Cruella Deville from 101 Dalmatians. I am sure if I asked some of you might be Maleficent or Evil Queens... Maybe a Scar or Jafar here or there. Often the ways the villains are presented makes the hero more complex and understood. Our brains love an oppositional figure in which to frame the good in the story.

In our real world we often frame terrible times based on the villainous actions of one person or leader. Many of us know the names, Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Genghis Khan, and Idi Amin. We might not know the specific timeframe or terrible actions that place them in our collective rogue's gallery but we recognize them from our association of dark times in history.

In the Luke-Acts combined gospel arc there is a central figure of darkness that rises over and over again. The reoccurring villain is Herod. In the nativity story in Luke, Jesus and his family must run from Herod's planned infanticide. In today's passage

Pharisees warn Jesus of Herod's schemes to kill him. He will reappear in Holy week as the reason Jesus lands before Pontius Pilate. We can even fast forward to Herod giving the order to have Paul sent to Rome to be tried by Nero. Herod stands as a single villain to the message of Christ.

There is only one problem with casting Herod as the ultimate Jesus foil in the New Testament. Herod is actually three different persons. The first Herod orders the death toll on newborns who threaten the empire. Then there is the Herod who kills John the Baptist, His son Herod Antipas. This one also fears the opposition Jesus embodies and plots to have him killed. When we follow the story into the book of ACTS his son sees the Christian Church and Paul as a threat to his power and world. This third Herod ships Paul off to Nero for trial and death. What caused three generations to hold such hate?

The Herods viewed Jesus and his ideas as a threat to a system but why? In our Luke passage today, Jesus is warned about Herod's hatred. But Jesus does not make this moment about Herod or himself but rather that God has been calling for connection from God's people for generations. Leaders fear that if God is heard and followed their hold and power will evaporate. Jesus offers the history in nearly poetic and very prophetic form... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you.

You need to hear Jesus in this moment as a prophet in a lineage of prophets. Always calling the people back to being in covenant with God. Standing with God threatens those who seek you to trust and stand with them alone. If you follow the prophetic thread through the scriptures from Moses, to Elijah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and John the Baptist, the prophets call us to be gathered by God into faithfulness and connection. This call often moves us from human follies and empires to being present with God. Despite the Bible villains changing from Pharaoh, to Nebuchadnezzar to Jezebel to Haman or Herod the prophetic heroes constantly call us to God and connectedness.

Jesus uses the brooding mother hen to show how God wants to gather us away from the places of abuse and excess into the love and connection with God. Jesus knows that the opposition to connection is real but will follow through to his own ending in Jerusalem to proclaim the truth. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

I want us to leave the story of Jesus and Herod in our minds as we return to the here and now of our world. Don't jump to the naming of villains instead like Jesus stay focused on the continuing prophetic voice. In the United Church of Christ, we love to say God is still speaking. God speaks to us in the words of the prophets calling us to connection and unity. So, to me God still stands as a mother hen gathering her brood under her wings. But here and now we are the ones called to offer the wings and the brooding.

Our world is filled with need and pain. So often we look to place the blame, point the fingers, demonizing the opposition. What if we concentrated on the gathering and connection instead? Herod's will always be in our world trying to replace God with systems... Instead, How might we lean deeper into God's plan and covenant.

Jesus offered us a baseline as to what was most important. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Simple and vastly complex wrapped together... so where might we begin. I am going to suggest we start in our life of prayer and its connections.

As you wrestle with your call to a brooding love and engage in prayer, I am going to ask you to do so in a special way. As I travel the state of Maine, I am meeting so many of my neighbors. And as I meet them in our United Church of Christ congregations, I invite them to love their neighbors in a specific way... through prayer and into knowing that they are being held in prayer as well. I let churches know that I have asked for my last two preaching opportunities to pray for my next two. On March Second, I asked the good people of Ellsworth First Congregational to be us this day by praying for us. Last week too I asked for prayers from Farmington Old South to brood us under their wings of prayer. They are praying for us and Lincolntown. This is an expression of our covenant to each other.... We hold that we are bound in sacred connection to others. Ellsworth and Farmington are praying for us this morning. They have done the prework of holding is in a web of prayerful connection. And Now it is your turn to pray it forward and hold the churches United Christian Church of Lincolntown and Union Church of South Bristol in your prayers. As you pray for those two churches pray too for the Mid Coast Association that you are part of... Pray for the Maine Conference... Pray for the United Church of

Christ... Pray for all who are in need of God's good grace... Pray for all those who are scattered, in pain and in need of hope and connection.

As you leave this place and time today praying it forward I want to be on the lookout for birds beginning to return home to Maine. We are near the threshold of brooding season and the skies, the marshes, waters, and trees are already holding a witness to the nurture and nature of our brooding God... I will offer as prayer here a poem from one of my favorites, Wendell Berry, as closing... He often speaks of spotting birds as a connection to our God... I leave you with his keen God focused vision.

What We Need Is Here

Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye,
clear. What we need is here.