

"GOD MOVES... PAST ALL OBSTACLES"

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Luke 13:31-35

(03-13-22) Lent 2

After his Transfiguration, Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem. That's where he's headed, **and nothing will deter his path**. He knows what he's in for. He knows what awaits him there. Betrayal awaits him, rejection awaits him, the cross awaits him, death awaits him in Jerusalem. **Yet, Jesus presses on**. But he's drawing more and more attention. His teaching, his healing, his calling out the hypocrisy of the privileged class, both religious and non-religious, has not gone unnoticed.

A group of Pharisees came to Jesus, warning him to leave town, that Herod was out to kill him. Now that's very interesting. Why would a group of Pharisees try to warn Jesus about Herod's intention to kill him? These were the very people that Jesus was calling out, accusing them of hypocrisy, calling them fools, full of greed and wickedness. Why would they want to warn Jesus? Wouldn't it have served their purposes if Herod had gotten rid of Jesus, like he did with John the Baptist?

It's not easy to understand the motivation of the Pharisees, but we are reminded that there were some in the group who admired and respected Jesus and we should remember to never judge an entire group by the actions of some, or even most. What's really strange is Jesus' response to the news of the Pharisees. Basically, Jesus says to the Pharisees to tell Herod that he's not going anywhere. He's got work to do and he's going to do it. He even foreshadows what will happen to him in Jerusalem, that it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem. Now none of this is all that strange, what's strange is the imagery Jesus uses in speaking of what awaits him. **He calls Herod a fox and he refers to himself as a mother hen**.

A fox and hen, what a strange analogy to use in this context! We know about foxes and hens, especially about foxes and hen houses. You don't let a fox guard a hen house because you're just courting disaster. When hens run up against foxes, the hens don't usually fare too well. They get eaten, they get killed. Of all the animals Jesus could have referenced for himself, a mother hen? I mean, I get the fox reference for Herod. Some people think of foxes as clever animals, gentler cousins of the more dangerous wolves. We see them in golf courses and parks and we don't think too much about the dangers that they pose, but in Jesus' time foxes were considered sinister, with no redeeming qualities at all. **When Jesus calls Herod a fox, it's not a compliment in any way**. We get this - but why then choose a hen to describe himself? A mother hen who gathers her chicks under her wings. Nice and gentle, and easy prey for a fox! Why not consider another bird, like an eagle? I mean scripture speaks of eagles in a positive way and an eagle, like one of those bald eagles you see near the south dyke road here in Richmond, it would be more than a match for a fox!

Or better yet, why not a lion, a regal, royal animal, the king of the animals. Why not the Lion of Judah or like Aslan in the Narnia chronicles?

Why a hen, a defenceless, vulnerable mother hen? **But Jesus is deliberate and intentional in his choices.** Jesus is on the move, that's our theme this Lent, God on the move. He's on the move towards Jerusalem, towards the cross. But he faces obstacles. Herod, who wants to kill him, the Pharisees who can't seem to make up their minds whether to help him or harm him, Jesus is faced with obstacles that stand in his way on the path to Jerusalem.

What do you do when you face obstacles? What kinds of obstacles have you faced in your life? Was it around getting the kind of job you wanted or perhaps the type of relationship you were looking for? Have you faced obstacles around your health, your family, your marriage, your kids? Have the obstacles you've faced concerned your faith? We've all faced some of these obstacles and others. **So how do we proceed, how to you proceed in the face of obstacles?**

I'll tell you how some people proceed. They try to barge through, they try to use force and power to overcome and breakdown whatever's in their way. I read an article this week in the NYT entitled, ***"This is why Putin can't back down."***¹ David Brooks argues that Vladimir Putin has convinced himself and many Russians, that Russia has been humiliated and wronged by other nations, particularly the West. He says that the war in Ukraine isn't primarily about land, but about status. Putin invaded so Russians could feel that they are a great nation once again and so Putin himself could feel that he's a world historical figure along the lines of Peter the Great. Brooks contends that Putin has battled feelings of shame and humiliation for most of his life and that his trying to appear powerful is his reaction to the humiliation he has felt as the former Soviet Union was dismantled and Russia slumped into a submissive position against the West. Faced with the obstacle of declining influence and power, Putin is lashing out, using as much force and power as he can muster to overcome his sense of humiliation. Brooks fears that Putin knows only one way to deal with humiliation, **to blame others and to lash out.** To quote Nelson Mandela, **"there is nobody more dangerous than one who has been humiliated."** This is part of what makes this war in Ukraine so dangerous. Putin can't back down or he will be humiliated all over again. Faced with obstacles, someone like Putin will try to barrel through, no matter the cost, and we're all paying the price.

Jesus could have done that. He could have taken Herod on face to face, strength to strength. He could have bulldozed over the obstacles that stood in his way. But think about how little sense that would make. **Why would a man who was set on Jerusalem, knowing that it meant death, try to overpower his enemies? A Jesus who would take on his opponents with power and force certainly wouldn't be looking to die in Jerusalem! Jesus doesn't choose the imagery of an eagle or a lion, but the mother hen, a picture of vulnerability if there ever was one.**

¹ *"This is why Putin can't back down."* David Brooks, The New York Times. March 10, 2020

Jesus responds to the obstacles he faces, not with force, not with power, not by blaming others or lashing out, **but with vulnerability**. Brene Brown has a very insightful TED Talk around vulnerability.² Some of you may have seen it, if you haven't, I would recommend you look it up. Brown was conducting a research project around human connection but she says that the stories people told her weren't about connection, but disconnection. **At the heart of this disconnection is the idea of shame, which really is the fear that others will see something about us that would make us unworthy of connection.** Brown discovered that the one thing that underpinned this sense of not being good enough **was excruciating vulnerability**. She found that there were two basic groups of people, those who had a strong sense of love and belonging and those who really struggled with it. The only difference between the two groups was that those who had a strong sense of love and belonging **believed that they were worthy of love and belonging, that's it, they believed they were worthy.**

So what did the people who believed they were worthy have in common, asked Brown. She concluded that the people who felt this way had a sense of courage. Courage comes from the Latin word for heart, "cor," and the original definition of courage was to tell the story of who you are with your whole heart. **The group had the courage to be imperfect, to be vulnerable. This group embraced the idea of vulnerability.** While the group who struggled with feeling a sense of love and belonging feared vulnerability, resisted it and fought it, the group that believed they were worthy embraced vulnerability. **And vulnerability is the birthplace of joy and creativity, love and belonging, its full of beauty and generosity.** Those who resist it, those who numb themselves to it, live lives full of anxiety, uncomfortable with grace, always feeling unworthy. **So what exactly is vulnerability, what does it look like?** One definition of vulnerability, according to Brown, is to do something even though there are no guarantees, to invest in a relationship that may or may not work out. **As Christians, we would say that vulnerability is the willingness to love without knowing that you will be loved back, with no guarantee of being loved in return.**

This is what Jesus does. In the face of the obstacles that stand in his way, Jesus doesn't push back with force or power, he embraces vulnerability. Jesus chooses the mother hen as his image. The hen stands no chance against the fox **but Jesus isn't trying to win in the conventional way.** If he were, he wouldn't have set his face to Jerusalem, he wouldn't have gone to that place where prophets meet their doom. Jesus knows what awaits him. **He knows that even though he loves, he will be rejected. He knows that even though he gives his life, he will be misunderstood. He doesn't lash out, he doesn't blame others, he chooses vulnerability and in doing, he changes the world.**

The war in Ukraine will not end without a heavy cost, the cost is too heavy already. Putin may win this battle, but he will lose the war. The decision to attack, to force, to use power to get his way, to hide his vulnerability, his humiliation, may work for a time but it will eventually fail. **It will fail because without vulnerability you can't forge human connection and you can't ultimately rule based only on fear or coercion.** Jesus moves past all obstacles, not with force,

² Brene Brown, <https://brenebrown.com/videos/ted-talk-the-power-of-vulnerability/> June 1, 2010

not with power, but with love, with vulnerability. It changes how we think, it changes the world.

In this week's Mid-Week Meditation, I quote a letter from the Bishop of the Reformed Church in Transcarpathia, which is a mainly Hungarian-speaking denomination in Ukraine. Bishop Sandor Zan-Fabian, admonished pastors and elders in Ukraine to stay, even as the young generations are fleeing. Stay where you are, writes the bishop. Taking care of the elderly left behind and the internally displaced persons seeking refuge in Western Ukraine is the most urgent social responsibility of the reformed community in Ukraine. **I ask everyone with love and respect, to stay in your place, remain where you are. There is a need for the Gospel, for gathering prayer and community, and for the ministry we owe to those left behind. Let us care for one another, remain humane, helpful and patient.**³

Human connection, that's what this is, that's what the gospel is, and it can't happen without vulnerability. And the vulnerability we as Christians are to embody is modeled after the vulnerability of our Lord Jesus Christ. Can you imagine telling people facing an invading horde to stay in their place, to remain where they are? But this is the gospel, this is the church that follows the way of Jesus. This is what it means to truly embrace vulnerability. **The Christians of the Reformed Church in Transcarpathia may not win the battle, but they will change the world.** And what about us? How will we respond to the obstacles that face us, that keep us from deepening our faith and relationship with Jesus? how will we reply to the challenges we encounter as we seek to live the kind of lives that Jesus intends for us? **I would suggest that the fear of vulnerability is, one of, if not the single greatest obstacle to following Jesus. Like too many people, we can deny our vulnerability and we can choose to follow the way of the fox, trusting in power, in strength, in authority.**

But ultimately the foxes of the world are nothing more than unclean, dog-sized carnivores that cannot have the last word.⁴ **The last word belongs to Jesus, who will gather to himself all who are willing, like a hen gathers her brood under her wings, even if it means giving up her life so that her chicks will live.**

Thanks be to God, Amen.

³ <https://reformatus.hu/english/news/circular-in-times-of-war-stay-where-you-are/> Feb. 25, 2022

⁴ Pam Fickenscher, *"Don't Fear the Thief."* The Journey with Jesus, Lent 2