

It doesn't take a biblical scholar to realize that we have wandered into a dangerous situation in today's gospel reading. Herod wants to kill Jesus, and when Herod wants you dead, you end up dead. He is like a fox in a henhouse and all of Jerusalem is defenseless against him.

Everyone has an agenda today. Herod wants to kill Jesus. The Pharisees want Jesus to run away. Jesus wants to protect the threatened children of Jerusalem and Jerusalem doesn't want to put their trust in this Jesus.

Herod wants the total control he calls peace. The Pharisees want to avoid confrontation with Herod. Jerusalem wants the healing without the danger and drama. Jesus wants to do the work of God that he was born to do. They are working at cross purposes; 3 of the voices are powered by fear. Jesus is powered by God's call and the anointing of the Spirit.

Jesus doesn't flee. He apparently doesn't even flinch. In a world with only 2 responses to danger: either fight or flee – Jesus chooses a third way - to stand solid and steady. Tell that fox, he says, that I am going to continue to cure folks and cast out demons. It will take 3 days for the work to be finished and then he's going to Jerusalem, not as a competing dictator but as a mother hen who comes to shelter the vulnerable ones, protecting their lives in the face of danger. He goes not for death but for life.

Here's a question for you. When you hear this story, do you ever ask yourself What is so dangerous about curing people and casting out demons? Why is Herod so uptight he needs to put a stop to it? Perhaps, it might be a matter of who Jesus is curing. Jesus heals everyone, not just the elite – notice that Jesus heals not on the centurion, but the centurion's servant. Jesus isn't healing the religious leaders but an anonymous woman who has been crippled for 13 years. Jesus didn't heal the man who was a pillar of the local synagogue but the daughter of the Syro-Phoenian woman – their sworn enemy! Maybe that's the problem.

Herod, like all tyrants everywhere, doesn't need an excuse – he's a predator who crushes life and he is lurking around this story. Flirt with this evil and you risk your life The contrast is clear and helpful to we who live

2000 years later. Herod is furious and vicious. Jesus, who is compassionate and protective uses a seemingly weak image of resolute shelter – the mother hen protecting her chicks - to explain his strength and purpose. Even though we've never lived under an occupying army like Rome, we get it.

And yet we fear. Where does our fear chase us? What do we choose? Who do we choose? Herod or Jesus?

There is no Herod in our lives. No Putin. Yet we set up barriers and guard borders and pass laws that designate some of our neighbors as dangerous; we call them the enemy. We live in a peaceful nation yet we manufacture conflict allowing a fox which roams far away to create chaos within our henhouse. Discomfort becomes fear becomes rejection and too often we stand silently and watch as this all becomes oppression and violence.

What is our purpose as people of faith? What is our calling? To rule? Or, to bring healing and life to our neighbors? Do we live in our fear or do we go about our work in the world, confident in the faithfulness of the Divine Creator?

Let's picture Jesus standing right here among us, asking us to consider which path to follow in 3 messy, uncomfortable areas of our shared life – racism, gender justice, and diversity.

What fear is keeping us from having real, face to face conversations about the racism which has shaped our institutions from education to health care to environmental protection to policing? What keeps us from honest conversation about the racial divide of our country and the toll it takes everyday on our black and brown brothers and sisters? Why do we find it so hard to listen openly to their stories and do the work we need to do to change the path forward?

What is it about gender lingo LBGTQA and a whole host of other designations that I don't always understand that we find so threatening? Let's sit down together, trusting in Jesus' call to provide shelter and

protection, and learn what we need to learn so that this house can be a sanctuary for all people to come and know God. Sure we will stumble over new labels and forget to use preferred pronouns, and possibly never truly understand what non-binary folk are trying to tell us. But what is our purpose here?

What threat do we imagine from our new neighbors – neighbors who speak a different language, have different customs, eat different foods – the folks who don't look like us? Why do we distrust their intentions and skills and intelligence?

Jesus stands resolute “You tell that fox, he says, ‘that today and tomorrow I am curing and casting out demons and on the third day my work will be done”

On the third day, who will be proved to be more trustworthy – the Herods of this world – the powers that be - or the Christ who was one with the Divine Source of all Life?

In our fear, will we shape larger weapons, refuse medical care to those whose choices we consider suspect, like Texas who is calling medical care for transgender children illegal child abuse? Will we erase all mention of them from the public realm as Florida has done making the word ‘gay’ illegal?

Or will we face our fear, the discomfort that comes with the unknown and strange, and say with the psalmist ‘the Lord is my refuge and my strength, a very present help in time of trouble.’

What will it be? Power or grace? Herod or Jesus? You choose.