

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem"

A Sermon delivered by Rev. John Balicki

St. Luke's Church, Wilton, Maine

March 16, 2025; Second Sunday in Lent

Based on Genesis 15:1-18; Philippians 3; Luke 13:31-35

Michael J. Fox, Megan Fox, Jamie Foxx, Foxy Lady, Brer Fox, the Fox and the Hound? No he wasn't like any of those foxes. The first label Jesus has for Herod in today's gospel is to call him a fox. It wasn't a compliment. Foxes at that time were crafty and sinister predators. Jesus wasn't that much of a name-calling kind of guy so who was this Herod guy and what did he do to deserve the label?

There are six different Herods in the New Testament so it's easy to get them confused. We met the Herod labeled as Great on the day of the Epiphany, the one the Magi went to seeking out information about some newborn king. While that Herod tried to kill all the babies born near Bethlehem over a span of two years, Joseph managed to whisk his young family to Egypt and momentarily out of danger. The Herod we meet today is his son, Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee from the years 20 to 40 CE. Like pretty much all the Herods, Antipas was not a nice man and not a man to be trifled with. He's the one who had John the Baptist beheaded, and was always on the alert for any threat to his supremacy. These Herods disabuse us of any romantic notions about politics. They remind us that the life of Jesus was embedded in the real politics of his day.

It would be nice to say that rulers like Herod Antipas were a thing of the past but something endemic in the human soul is the desire for power, control and greed and the most unjust of rulers have no qualms exercising whatever needs to be done to keep them in power. Today we continue our theme we started last week of Refugee Sunday. So who are these refugees and why do we need a special Sunday to celebrate them.

- Refugees are children, women, and men who are forced from their homes due to persecution and violence on account of who they are, what they believe, or the group to which they belong. They are victims of unjust rulers and long-held ethnic and racial prejudices. They are people, just like you and me – with stories, hopes, and dreams. "Refugee" is an international legal category. It's not who they are. It's something that's happened to them.
- There are more than 110 million forcibly displaced people on Earth today, 35.3 million of whom are refugees. Half of all refugees are children. We are in the largest refugee crisis since World War II.

- Refugees are survivors. They've overcome tremendous hardship, faced horrors unimaginable to most of us. They are brave, strong, and resilient people. And they bring great strengths and gifts to the communities that welcome them.

No one wants to be a refugee; no one wants to leave their homeland unless life there becomes intolerable and life-threatening. 35 million refugees comprise a seemingly "Endless Road" which brings us to the painting on our bulletin cover. Each one of these 35.3 million is a person with a story, with a name, with hopes, and with dreams. Each is a beloved child of God.

We are living in a time when the political conversation and media messages about refugees too often veer to the negative and dehumanizing. Into this challenging environment, we are called, as followers of Christ, to share the Good News of God: to be ministers of welcome and bearers of hope. To remind everyone we meet - neighbors near, and neighbors far - of their belovedness as a child of God

Many of our most well-known biblical characters were refugees. In our first lesson today, Abram is in the midst of a long sojourn. He left his homeland in Ur of the Chaldeans with all of his tribe, a seemingly Endless Road, and we hear how he and his descendants are given a land from the river of Egypt to the River Euphrates.

Jesus too could be considered a refugee. He and his followers had no fixed address, traveling the Galileean countryside and occasionally wandering outside its bounds. It is just such a time when Jesus gets warned, like those flashing lights on our modern interstates "Problem ahead. Seek alternate route". It's a pretty stern warning, Jesus receives, "Herod wants to kill you."

Jesus declares that he will keep working today, tomorrow and the third day and I don't care about the warning, I have to go through Jerusalem. And then Jesus laments over Jerusalem. Jesus and his family traveled to Jerusalem once a year on pilgrimage. When he says, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," he is grieving for a city that he loves. Much like a refugee would say looking back on their home country, grieving the loss of family, culture, their favorite foods. Or as some of us may be saying today, "Washington, Washington" you were at one time a symbol of freedom and justice, at least some of the time. In his poignant lament over the city, Jesus is able to see beyond the evil destructiveness of its power holders to the worth of the people in it. Thus he bewails the city's history of repudiating God's messengers, the prophets.

Which leads Jesus to dismiss Herod with an insult: "go tell that fox that nobody will stop me from fulfilling my mission in Jerusalem." He mocks Herod as a weaselly poser

or pompous pretender. Jesus threatened the political powers, not because he sought to control what they controlled, says the historian Garry Wills, but because "he undercut its pretensions and claims to supremacy." This becomes even more obvious if we fast forward to the end of Lent and the arrest of Jesus. Today we hear this as a religious story, but in its own day it was explicitly political. It was political when Jesus rides into Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday on a donkey with a ragtag group of followers in opposition to Pilate entering with Roman legions on the opposite side. It was political when Jesus gets dragged before Pilate and then Herod Antipas for three reasons, all of them political: subverting the nation, refusing to pay taxes, identifying himself as Christ, a King.

In the epistle this week, Paul says that "our citizenship is in heaven." for Paul the implications were more political than spiritual. Garry Wills uses the same language in his book "What Jesus Meant". He writes, "the program of Jesus's reign can be seen as a systematic antipolitics." There's no such thing as a "Christian" politics, he says, and efforts by both Democrats and Republicans to co-opt Jesus for their cause distort the gospels.

In place of a radically relativized politics, the Hebrew Bible commends an ethic or way of life. Micah 6:8 comes to mind: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God. Speak out for those who have no voice. Protect the weak, feed the poor, free the slaves, and welcome the alien. The sovereign God calls each one of us to a larger community that's characterized by "fellow feeling." We are all on that Endless Road together. That is, we trust ourselves to God alone and are responsible for each other. Perhaps Refugee Sunday is not just for those who have traveled here from other nations. Perhaps it includes all of us.

When life changes, when normal deserts us, when we choose to be brave enough to deepen a relationship, try a new spiritual practice, let go of habits or things in our lives that really aren't doing it for us anymore, when we dare to trust in God's promise and care for us, we can join the Psalmist in saying, "The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?". Can we claim our citizenship of heaven - to live by radical acts of faith and hope, to serve the least and lost in a self-sacrificing love of neighbor.

