

It's Always the Third Day

Luke 13:31-35

We know the story well. Jesus was journeying toward Jerusalem. When he arrived in the capital city, he would be welcomed with a great parade. The crowd along the main street would cheer, “**Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord**” (Matthew 13:35). A few days after that, the crowd would turn on Jesus. He would face a trial, crucifixion, death, and burial. Then, on the third day, Christ would be raised from the dead. On the third day, there would be new life.

Amos Wilder, a distinguished Harvard New Testament scholar wrote:

Retell, renew the event
In these planetary years,
For we were there and He is here;
It is always the third day.ⁱ

Treasure that assurance in the front of your mind. It is always the third day. As Jesus and the apostles walked toward Jerusalem, the group stopped now and again for Jesus to preach the gospel, heal the sick, and cast out demons.

By necessity, these stops were brief because Jesus had a rendezvous with destiny in Jerusalem. In a quiet moment at one of these stops, a group of Pharisees alerted Jesus to impending danger. “Get away from here, for (King) Herod wants to kill you” (v. 31).

Luke’s gospel doesn’t mention the Pharisees’ motivation. It may have been heartfelt. They may have heard of a plot against Jesus and wanted to warn him. Or their motive may have been more sinister. Like a threat or to move him along. “Get away from here for Herod wants to kill you.”

Some background would be important here. Understand that there was more than one king named Herod. At the time of Jesus’ birth, Herod the Great was king. When the Magi stopped to ask for directions so they could visit the baby boy born “king of the Jews,” Herod the Great ordered the deaths of all baby boys under the age of two. Infant genocide was Herod the Great’s way of getting rid of a perceived rival. Herod the Great was an especially vicious fellow.

His grandson, Herod Agrippa was known for extravagant spending on himself. He was excessively greedy, took bribes, and colluded with the Romans. Herod Agrippa became king by falsely accusing his uncle of being disloyal to Caligula, the Roman emperor. Like his grandfather, Herod Agrippa was not a nice person.

Herod Agrippa’s uncle, King Herod Antipas, was ruler during the ministry of Jesus. Antipas was the Herod who had John the Baptist arrested and beheaded. Antipas was also instrumental in the trial of Jesus. As with his father and nephew, Herod Antipas had a bad reputation.

When the Pharisees told Jesus, “Get away from here, Herod wants to kill you,” they might have been referring to Herod Antipas. On the other hand, they may have been using the name as shorthand for the usual bad behavior of all the local rulers. Whatever their motivation and to whomever the Pharisees referred, Jesus responded to their warning to get out of town by saying, “**Go tell that fox.**”

Today, to call someone a “fox” is to say something positive, as in “that’s one foxy lady” or “he’s a sly, cunning fox.” But in biblical times a fox is portrayed in a negative light. And the reason is obvious. A fox, while physically beautiful, is a vicious, sneaky, tricky, unrelenting predator. A fox leaves a trail of destruction and death in its wake.

So let me paraphrase Jesus’ response to the Pharisees’ warning. When Jesus says, “Go tell that fox” he’s really saying “Go tell that vicious, predatory old fox that I’m occupied with other matters today and tomorrow, but know this, the third day will come.” In other words, “No matter how threatening the world might be today and tomorrow, life’s cruel ways will not last. Resurrection is coming. New life comes on the third day - and it’s always the third day.

Within this short discourse is also a magnificent simile of Jesus’ love, not only for the residents of Jerusalem, but a simile of God’s love for all people. **“How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.”**

Many, if not most of us, have no firsthand experience of the behavior Jesus described. Our personal experience with chickens is limited to that which is freshly packaged at the grocery store or cooked and ready to eat from the Colonel at KFC. Jesus’ audience, however, knew chicken behavior.

For thousands of years, they were raised in the backyard. People lived with chickens. They watched them every day. They watched hens react to impending threat. When a fox first came into view, the hen started to bring her chicks under the shelter of her wings. If the fox got too close, the hen launched an attack against the predator. The hen was willing to sacrifice her life for her brood.

Jesus is here telling us that God’s love for us is like that. **“There have been so many times that I wanted to gather the children of God together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.”** This is a warm and wonderful simile.

But we should not misunderstand. The hen cannot guarantee her brood an under-wing safe haven from misfortune. In fact, the mother hen rarely wins a battle with the fox. She is selfless in her devotion to her little ones, but she’s no match for the long claws and sharp teeth of the predator. Unless there is some other intervention, the fox will likely kill and eat the hen. Then, if it fits his fancy, the fox will kill and eat the chicks as well.

When you look at this from a different angle, you’ll notice that this is a fitting description for the reality of the world in which we live. God’s love for us is unconditional. We can and will be redeemed by the sacrificial love of God in Christ Jesus.

But **God’s love does not protect us from all the threats and ravages of this world.** There are some really miserable things that can and do happen.

It was in the middle of a cold northern Michigan winter. The inland lakes had been frozen solid for weeks. There were two couples in their early thirties. Each had two children less than ten years old. Both families were highly regarded in the community.

That 56 mile snow-machine ride around Lake Charlevoix’s shoreline seemed a wonderful idea. The fathers had checked their route the previous week. The ice was several feet thick. It was safe. They started the adventure early Saturday morning.

The parents rode the snowmachines with the kids towed behind on sleds. The plan was to stop in the little town of East Jordan for breakfast. They were driving on the ice into the rising sun and didn't see that a tributary, the Jordan River, had opened a channel in the ice.

The snow-machines, sleds, and all eight travelers went into the cold, open water. With the added burdens of machinery and heavy, wet winter clothing, both parents in one family and a small child in the other family drowned. Two families ripped apart because a stream beneath the ice had intersected with the warm rays of the winter's sun.

We see this all around us. A tornado hits a neighborhood and destroys a hundred homes. A hurricane wipes out a shoreline and costs millions to repair. A drought destroys crops and kills trees. A flood floats one home down the river and fills the others with two feet of stinking mud. A plane falls from the skies. A lunatic shoots up a Mosque, or a Synagogue, or a church. We're always vulnerable to the fox.

Of course, not all the threats come from nature. In T.S. Eliot's play *The Cocktail Party*, one of the characters is Celia Coplestone. An accomplished person, Celia longs for happiness and meaning in her life. She has tried the social attractions: theatre, receptions, cocktail parties, even an affair with Edward, another character in the play.

Celia has tried it all, yet something is missing. She goes to a psychiatrist and in time, has an insight. The source of her existential anxiety lies not in the world around her, but within herself. She herself says, "There's something wrong with me." Celia comes to realize that she is the fox in her own life.

Human beings are threatened and harmed, not only by outside forces, but by our own decisions. It's another of the givens of the human condition. In the midst of trying to convince Brutus to join the conspiracy against Julius Caesar, Shakespeare caused Cassius to make the same point, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves."

In her spiritual autobiography, *Traveling Mercies*, Ann Lamott describes how as a child, she had a friend whose father was in prison and whose mother was an alcoholic. Ann says that even though that friend's family life was dysfunctional, she preferred spending time with her at her home. Ann explained that there was consistency in that house. Her friend's father was always in prison and her mother was always drunk. At Ann Lamott's house, one never knew what was going to happen next. By the time she was in her early thirties, Ann had descended into a life of drug addiction, alcohol abuse, and promiscuity.

Ann Lamott knew what Celia Coplestone meant when she said, "There is something wrong with me." Yet, Ann also listened for the hope in a line by T.S. Eliot who wrote, "There is something wrong with me *that could be put right.*" Whatever is wrong with us can be put right. That is the hope.ⁱⁱ

Ann's life was put right when she came to know Jesus Christ and the power of his resurrection. She said that her conversion took place, not as an instantaneous leap of faith, but as a series of staggering steps from what seemed like one safe place to another.

Along the way, there was a minister who listened — really listened. There was a little church in the neighborhood where she heard the music from the street long before she found the courage to enter.

Then there was a certain night in the midst of a medical emergency. Where she had falling down drunk, late at night, while home alone. She felt someone with her in the dark and claims beyond all doubt that it was the presence of Jesus. A week later she stopped resisting. "I shouted, '[expletive deleted] I quit. You can come in now.'"

And Ann's life was changed. She was set on the right path by the power of the presence of God encountered in the course of an ordinary day; an ordinary day that proved to be one of those third day encounters.

You never know just when you or someone you know will say, "There is something wrong with me, but I believe it can be set right." Indeed it can, but it takes one of those third day encounters. Fortunately, as Amos Wilder put it:

Retell, renew the event
In these planetary years,
For we were there and (God) is here:
It is always the third day.
Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ From the website joyfulpapist.wordpress.com/2010/04/09/it-is-always-the-third-day/

ⁱⁱ *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999).