

### Foxes, Hens, and Chicks

Let's play a game. I think this one is called the "Simile" game. I will say, "as [blank] as a [blank]." I'll fill in the second blank, and you try to fill in the first. Let me give you an example. "As [blank] as a . . . rock." What is the answer? "Hard." Let's try some others. "As [blank] as an . . . ox" [strong]. "As [blank] as a feather" [light]. "Giraffe" [tall]. "Bee" [busy].

Okay, how about this one. "As [blank] as a fox." What words could we put in the first blank? Sly. Shrewd. Sneaky. (Look at the picture on the back of the bulletin; maybe that will give you some ideas.) How about . . . bloodthirsty? Cruel? Dangerous?

So what did Jesus mean when he referred to Herod as "*that fox*?" The Greek word is *άλώπηξ*, and the lexicons generally say something like, "*άλώπηξ: literally, fox; figuratively, crafty, sly person*." Which isn't necessarily a bad thing to be, right? Was Jesus actually giving Herod a compliment? Was he acknowledging that Herod was a pretty clever person, a rather wise ruler?

On the other hand, in the Old Testament the Hebrew word for "fox" is *לְשׂוּן*, and it appears in the Old Testament as a creature that is not merely crafty, but cunning, deceitful, carnivorous, false, destructive. Definitely not a compliment. So again we have to ask, how did Jesus mean it?

This Herod is actually *Herod Antipas*, who was the son of the king known as "Herod the Great." That Herod was the horrible one who ordered the killing of "*all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under*" [*project Matt 2:16*], out of paranoia that the Magi had come to worship a newly born king, who might just be "greater" than he was. But his son Herod Antipas was, unfortunately, no less horrible. After first marrying the daughter of a Nabatean king, he fell in love with his brother Philip's wife Herodias, and married her. Then, after inviting Herodias' daughter Salome to dance for his entertainment, he was so "moved" that he offered her anything she wanted. Do you remember what she asked for? The head of John the Baptist. And Herod Antipas had granted her request.

And now a group of Pharisees come to tell Jesus that this same Herod wants to have him killed, and that he should "*get away from here*" [*13:31*]. From what we know about the Pharisees, we're tempted to question their motives. Were they really concerned about his well-being? Or was this merely a convenient way for them to get rid of Jesus? In fact, I'm frankly surprised Jesus didn't call the Pharisees "foxes."

Who in our world might Jesus refer to as a fox, or "*that fox*?" What world leaders seem particularly sly, crafty, cunning, voracious, destructive? Vladimir Putin would certainly be at the top of most people's lists right now. But might there be others? What other leaders in our world (including our own nation) use their power in ways that are voraciously self-serving, and even destructive?

And I suspect that Jesus wouldn't stop with just world leaders. What other leaders (including church leaders, or really anyone with power and authority) are not just sly but self-serving and destructive?

In any event, Jesus calls them as he sees them. And the fact is that there are "foxes" in our world. People who use their power and authority and strength to take advantage of those

who are weaker, who have less power. May we, at least, always look out for the weak in our world, whether we're a pastor, or other church leader, or teacher, or employer, or anyone having the "superior" gender and skin color, or simply any U.S. citizen who carries the power of the vote—which is pretty much all of us. Please, God, help us to not be foxes!

Interesting that in this very same passage, Jesus likens himself to a mother "*hen*." Let's play the simile game again. "As [blank] as a hen." What characteristics come to mind? Gentle? Loving? Protective? Some of us might even have raised hens at some point, and have an entirely different perspective. How about, "noisy? Fussy? Smelly? Simple-minded?"

It seems clear from the way Jesus used the image that a mother hen is an animal that is naturally nurturing, fiercely protective, determinedly loving. He implies that these are characteristics he seeks to embody in his ministry, and in his life. And therefore, by association, we should too. Our instinct should be to gather, to care for, to protect, to nurture, to feed, to watch over. Especially our children, or for anyone who is weaker—which, frankly, at one time or another, could be any of us. We pretty much take turns being weak.

And that brings us to Jesus' third animal metaphor in this passage, namely, a *brood* of chicks. Let's consider what we know about baby chicks. How might we describe them, in general terms? Chicks are . . . ? Small. Helpless. Vulnerable. Even more simple minded than their mother. Eager and even anxious to follow others. Especially their mother hen. Baby chicks do eventually grow up to become full grown chickens, whether hens or roosters. But for now, that is still in the future.

In what ways are we like baby chicks, or maybe, are we called to be like baby chicks? Vulnerable? Willing and eager to follow? Dependent (on one another, and especially on their mother or father)? Small? Immature? But with great potential for the future?

To the extent that we are all in some ways like chicks, may we allow ourselves to be gathered under the wings of our mother hen. May we gather willingly and eagerly. May we follow obediently and faithfully. May we acknowledge our vulnerabilities. May we know without question who our mother hen is. May we look to her and no one else for protection. May we eat the food our mother gives us. That we too may grow up to be adult hens and roosters, mature, compassionate, fiercely loyal, even if a bit simple-minded. And in the meantime, may we always chip and chirp with joy!

In closing, it's ironic that Jesus likens himself to a mother hen. Because before it's all over, when it's said and done, he will allow himself to become like a baby chick again. Vulnerable. Weak. Small. Yet one more victim of the foxes in our world.

And yet, he is unafraid. Not naively, but confidently. Not even "that fox" Herod can keep him from doing what he was sent here to do. Namely journey to Jerusalem, that fox-like city that stones its prophets, and yet whose children he loves tenderly.

He knows beyond a shadow of doubt who his mother hen is. And he trusts her completely. In this regard too, may we faithfully follow Jesus, our mother hen.

Amen.