The Fox in the Henhouse

The BREAKING NEWS Series
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The story went viral Wednesday, quickly spreading to news outlets worldwide. Because it wasn’t headline news, editors did not publish it on the front page. But what happened was so unusual that they did put it into print. The piece was captioned: “They attacked him with their beaks: Fox in France pecked to death by 3,000 chickens.”

Evidently, a young healthy fox slyly snuck into a corporate-sized coop, when the free-range chickens returned to lay their eggs and roost for the night. An automated door, light sensors triggered by the setting sun, swung shut, trapping the fox inside. This happened at a school of agriculture in France’s Brittany region. The students found the dead fox in the morning.

"There was a herd instinct and they attacked him with their beaks," Pascal Daniel, chair of the school’s farming faculty, told the French news agency. He added that they must have learned to defend themselves, because they didn’t fare as well the last time a fox got in the henhouse.¹

I bet they didn’t! Which is why there is an idiom in the English language that one should never allow a “fox in the henhouse” or let a “fox guard the henhouse.” A fox is a predator. Chickens are its prey. The obvious implication of the old saying: don’t hire a thief as a bank officer, don’t permit a drug addict to dispense prescriptions, don’t appoint Cabinet secretaries unable to embrace the mission of the agencies they are expected to lead. Doing so is stupid. The result won’t be pretty. Once inside, foxes run roughshod, with disastrous consequences.

While some trace the saying’s origin to Roman times, and others note that Aesop, in Greece, wrote a fable about a fox and a rooster six centuries before Christ’ birth, most linguists date the phrase to 1589, to a document entitled The Contre-League and Answere to Certaine Letters Sent to the Maisters of Renes, by One of the League who Termeth Himselfe Lord of the Valley of Mayne, and Gentleman of the Late Duke of Guizes Traine.² How’s that for a title? Inside is this line: “Therefore, when thou sayest that the king will give us the king of Navarre for our governour, thou sayest, he is a wolfe to keep the sheep, and a foxe to looke to the hennes.”³

Jesus expresses similar sentiment toward the one sitting on throne in his day. Having spent three years conducting his ministry up north, in the Galilean region, he now sets his face toward Jerusalem, and is working his way south toward the capitol city. A group of Pharisees approach him with breaking news: “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” Jesus replies: “You go and tell that fox for me...” And then Jesus likens himself to a mother hen, spreading her wings to protect her chicks from that fox.

It’s hard to know precisely what to make of the sudden appearance of these Pharisees. Aren’t the Pharisees (well, except for Nicodemus) always the villains in the gospel stories? Fundamentalist religious lawyers, not only personally committed to dotting every “i” and crossing every “t” in the old Mosaic law, but also zealously intent on making everyone else follow every statute down to the last jot and tittle. Weren’t they the ones forever out to entrap Jesus and undermine his ministry? So, why are they warning him now about Herod’s plans?

There is argument that these particular Pharisees were riding the fence, not particularly happy with Herod but not quite ready to follow Jesus either. Perhaps their warning him of Herod’s plan was a way of hedging their bets: if Jesus was the promised Messiah, they had done him a favor; if not, Herod need never know they had tried to help him.

It’s a possibility we can understand: content to be Christian, as long as it doesn’t get us into any trouble; happy to be in Jesus’ presence and hear what he is saying, as long as his teaching doesn’t land us in argument and controversy; willing to wear a cross on our lapel or around our neck, as long as we don’t have to protest injustice or engage in civil disobedience.

But Scott Hoezee of Calvin Theological Seminary doesn’t buy it, writing:

I am convinced that the Pharisee’s “warning” to Jesus about Herod is a feint. It may or may not have been a fabrication, an outright lie, but it was conveyed to Jesus not to protect him but to get him out of their sight. They couldn’t pin anything on Jesus, and his teachings and healings were generating palpable enthusiasm among the masses. Jesus was already far more popular than the Pharisees had ever been (and this should come as no surprise to anyone in that the average Pharisee was about as much fun as an impacted wisdom tooth). Their...attempt to hustle Jesus away only showed how content they were to stay on the outside of whatever kingdom Jesus was talking about.⁴

There also is an argument that these Pharisees actually were sent by Herod to dissuade Jesus from moving any further into his territory, to draw a line in the sand to let Jesus know enough is enough, to give him an ultimatum that if he continues his present course Herod will silence him.

If so, Jesus understood the message clearly. He knew that his teachings were far less focused on the law (as the Pharisees would have preferred) but rather on the prophets...and a prophet’s

⁴ https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/lent-2c/.
call is to speak truth to power, even when that power sits on the throne...and those who sit on thrones inevitably act to silence any prophet daring to expose their unethical, immoral, illegal, or otherwise ungodly ways. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” Yes, Jesus got the message. He just wasn’t about to let it stop him. “You go and tell that fox...” Go and tell Herod that Jesus is not taking any marching orders from him. Oh, and by the way, you Pharisees, you can go and take a hike, too. “I must be on my way...” His marching orders come directly from God.

Jesus called Herod a fox, not because he was wily or crafty, sly or cunning, but because he was predatory and destructive. He said this about Herod Antipas, one of Herod the Great’s children.

Herod the Great, you will recall, held the title “King of the Jews” at the time of Jesus’ birth. Herod the Great, the builder of monumental structures, actually was a puppet king, who had been put on the throne by colluding with the Romans. Herod the Great was the one who committed the crime of infanticide, ordering all the male children under the age of two to be killed, when the Magi failed to return and report where Jesus had been born. He would not permit any potential threat to his power – even a newborn “King of the Jews” -- to survive. He also executed one of his wives, two of his children, and numerous other detractors.

Upon King Herod the Great’s death, his will divided his kingdom into four sections, one for each of his remaining kids to govern. But the Romans didn’t allow those children to claim the title “king,” but rather “tetrarch” or “ruler of a quarter,” as if to remind them that they were subordinate, that their authority was dependent upon the Emperor’s pleasure and their continued collaboration with Rome. Herod Antipas, like his dad, was ruthless. He’s the one who beheaded John the Baptist. Writes Professor Leslie Hoppe of the Catholic Theological Union:

> Jesus had no use for Antipas. During his Galilean ministry, he never entered...Sepphoris, which was his first capital, and Tiberias, which Antipas built to replace Sepphoris. These cities represented the antithesis of the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. They were monuments to attempts to Romanize the people of Galilee...to a new world – a world whose center was Rome and whose values were opposed to the values of the gospel.5

Herod Antipas was a fox because he had given in to the temptations Jesus had resisted in the wilderness: given in to the temptation to put himself first and his own self-interests foremost, even if it cost others their lives; given in to the temptation to compromise with evil for the sake of expediency, conspiring with the Romans to secure position and power; given in to the temptation to bow down and worship the empire’s values – commercial materialism, industrial militarization, and world domination -- even though they were contrary to God’s will and ways, the precise opposite of doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly, speaking out for those who have no voice, protecting the weak, feeding the poor, freeing the slaves, welcoming the alien, embracing peace rather than violence, and so forth...the values taught by Jesus.

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And Herod the fox wanted to silence Jesus once and for all time – to kill him – because the values for which Jesus stood threatened his reign, undercut his pretensions and claims, and called his subjects to become citizens of an alternative realm with competing values: citizens of heaven, as Paul later put it; citizens whose loyalty was neither to Herod Antipas nor to the Roman empire for which he stood, but rather to the kingdom of God alone. As the Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan observed in his commentary on Acts, to confess that Jesus is Lord is to reject everyone else’s claim of sovereignty. Loyalty to Christ the king is absolute and unconditional, whereas fidelity to any nation or state is relative and conditional.6

So, as author/pastor/Harvard fellow Nancy Rockwell summarizes it:

> Jesus thought of Herod, just a slobbering, blood-thirsty fellow who was out for the easy kills. And Herod, for his part, thought of Jesus as an easy kill, a chicken. It’s interesting that Jesus, on his way into Jerusalem, weeps over the city, calling all its people chicks he would like to protect.  

Interesting, indeed. Three times in this short encounter, occupying just five short verses, we find the Greek word θέλω, meaning “to want,” “to desire,” “to will,” “to wish,” “to long for.” Herod Antipas wants to kill Jesus. Jesus desires to gather God’s children under his wing for protection. But the chicks are unwilling to come to the mother hen. They wish to remain exposed to the fox. What is it about human nature that makes us continue to play this dangerous game? To think we aren’t doing anything wrong when we pick our values like a meal in a Chinese restaurant – one off column A representing national values, another off column B listing God’s revealed will. To believe that we can bow to Caesar Monday through Friday while maintaining our allegiance to Christ is to fall prey to sin. The scriptures call us to choose sides. Cautions the Rev. Joe Evans, senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Marietta, GA:

> Herod is a fox -- and if you think you can serve two masters, if you think you can handle it all, you better be careful because given the chance Herod will eat you, take everything, and leave you empty… [D]on’t you see -- the fox is in the hen house -- and the fox is not in this for your salvation. The fox is in the hen house -- as credit cards promise happiness, but only deliver debt and worry. The fox is in the hen house -- as the news assaults us with a continual alarm, fear for who is out there, and painting opponents as idiots and liars. The fox is in the hen house -- telling us working 60 to 80 hours a week will pay off in time, but when the budget gets tight the fox will lay you off and wish you good luck... The fox is not worthy of our faith though the fox would like us to believe otherwise. As people of faith in a culture of fear, we must be about calling the fox a fox, talking about truth in a world of misstatements, talking about what love really is in a world of pleasure and pleasing, prioritizing our lives by what really matters…because if we don’t the fox will do it for us and lead our children down the path to destruction.8

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8 [http://day1.org/4533-the_fox_is_in_the_henhouse](http://day1.org/4533-the_fox_is_in_the_henhouse).