

## DO YOU WANT TO SEE JESUS?

The Rev. J. Donald Waring  
Grace Church in New York  
The Second Sunday in Lent  
March 13, 2022

*“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34)*

Some of you know that I am a preacher’s kid. My father was an Episcopal priest, who served as the rector of two churches in the Diocese of Newark, NJ during the 1960s and 70s. At one point Dad was offered the opportunity to become a cathedral dean – a position he thought would be a real feather in his cap. The only wrinkle was that the cathedral was not close by, not near any family, but halfway across the country in Sioux Falls, SD. Nevertheless, the calling was irresistible (to Dad), so off we went.

Calvary Cathedral in Sioux Falls was and is a lovely place, and life on the northern Great Plains turned out to be good once we adjusted to the winters. At the time we had only one car, so frequently the whole family would be stranded at the church waiting for Dad to finish some meeting and drive us home. We’d be stuck because we lived too far away to walk and my mother didn’t like to drive. The city had no public transportation. Cell phones with ride sharing apps were still decades in the future. So to pass the time my brothers and I would go exploring through every nook and cranny of the building, going places where were not supposed to go.

I especially remember one feature of the pulpit. Carved into the podium, for only the eyes of the preacher, was a quote from John’s Gospel (12:21), when some Greeks approached the Apostle Philip and said: *Sir, we would see Jesus*. Even at my young age I deduced that those five words were meant to be a plea from every congregation who would ever sit in the pews of the cathedral. *Show us Jesus, please*. The first time I saw the words engraved into the oak I can recall thinking to myself, “Wow. That just sounds way too hard. I’m glad that my destiny is to make my way back to the east coast as a professional baseball player or something like that – but definitely not as a preacher!” Well, God has a sense of humor. In time I did make my way back to the east coast. But here I stand in a pulpit, still looking for Jesus.

How do we go looking for Jesus? Where might we find him? In today’s reading from the Gospel of Luke (13:31-35), we do indeed see Jesus, but not Jesus alone, not Jesus free and clear of worldly concerns and tending only to spiritual matters. We see Jesus in relation to Herod. Luke writes: *Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.’”* When Jesus called Herod “that fox,” it was not a compliment. But why the name calling, and who was Herod, anyway? Note well, the Herod whom Luke writes about today was not Herod the Great, King of the Jews when Jesus was born. No, today we meet Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. Herod Antipas was never granted his father’s title, King of the Jews. Instead, he was the Tetrarch of Galilee, in charge of the agrarian region well north of Jerusalem.

In the Gospels Herod Antipas comes across as a self-serving, corrupt, and even debauched individual. Three incidents give us progressively deeper windows into his soul. The first would be his marital history. Herod was married to an Arab princess, but he took an unholy liking to his half-brother’s wife, a woman named Herodias. With his heart set on his sister-in-law, Herod divorced his wife and sent her back to her kingly father. Then he began wooing Herodias, eventually convincing her to leave her husband – Herod’s half-brother – and marry him. Guess what Herodias’ ex-husband’s

name was. Would you believe Herod II? You need a scorecard to keep them all straight, and I'm only skimming the surface.

The second window into the soul of Herod Antipas concerns John the Baptist. John was a Galilean prophet preaching in the wilderness, and when he learned of the illicit union between Herod and Herodias, he railed against the whole family. Herodias didn't like it, so she devised a scheme to get rid of John. To celebrate his birthday, Herod hosted a lavish banquet in his own honor, and invited many guests. Herodias had a daughter from her previous marriage, a young woman named Salome, presumably the niece of Antipas, and now step-daughter. Herodias arranged for Salome to do a provocative dance at the banquet. All the men were gratified, most especially Herod Antipas: her uncle, now her step-father. How sick is that? As a reward Herod promised to give Salome anything, up to half his kingdom. Herodias advised her daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod gave the order and John was slain.

The third widow opens only briefly, but perhaps the view it provides of Herod's soul is the most telling of all. It occurs later on in the Gospel of Luke (23:6-12), at the trial of Jesus after his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. You may recall that the Roman soldiers first brought Jesus to Pontius Pilate for questioning, but when Pilate learned that Jesus was a Galilean, he sent him over to Herod, who was staying in Jerusalem at the time. Herod was surprised, but pleased. He too wanted to see Jesus. He'd long heard about Jesus, and hoped that one day the miracle worker might perform a little magic show just for him. Give me a sign, Jesus. You see, once again from Herod's point of view, life was all a great quest to fulfill his own desires. Thus Jesus, brought before him, was merely an opportunity to satisfy his curiosity. But when he questioned Jesus at length, Jesus spoke not a word. He refused to dignify the questions with a response. I was amused by one commentator, who stated the obvious about the passage: "It's a bad sign when Jesus says nothing."<sup>1</sup> It was a sign that Jesus did not like Herod, "that fox," at all.

In today's reading from Philippians (3:17-4:1), St. Paul writes that we are citizens of heaven. The challenge is that in the meantime – or at the same time – we are inhabitants of the earth. As mortal creatures dwelling in time and space, we can hear no pure gospel that is detached from the cares of the world. The Gospel of Luke, in particular, often links the life of Jesus to the dates of particular rulers and politicians. For example: *And in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was Governor of Syria (2:1-2).* Here's another: *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea (3:1).* I know, you want to see Jesus. But the point is, we don't see Jesus without the politicians. We don't see Jesus apart from the Caesars and governors and tetrarchs and all the political rough and tumble of his day.

How about in our day? Do we see Jesus amidst the politics of today? What would Jesus have to say to the world leaders currently on center stage? At his trial Jesus had not a single word for Herod. Would he have anything to say to Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, who has started a war that has killed thousands and uprooted millions? We have looked into the soul of Herod. Do we dare gaze at Putin? A chilling story is told about a 2011 encounter between then Vice President Biden and Putin during a meeting at the Kremlin. At one point Biden was up close to Putin and said, "Mr. Prime Minister, I'm looking into your eyes and I don't think you have a soul." Putin replied, "We understand one another."<sup>2</sup>

How about the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy? What would Jesus have to say to him? Is the Spirit of the living Christ to be found in his actions as he stays with his people, urging them to fight on and resist the Russian invasion? Wait, you say, isn't it insensitive to speak of the Spirit of Jesus dwelling in Zelenskyy? He's Jewish. So was Jesus, we might reply. Jesus does not confine his Spirit to Christians alone. We can see him potentially in anyone. Even in the fog of war it's pretty clear which of these two world leaders is trying to defend his people, and which one is trying to devour them.

In today's reading from Luke, after Jesus likened Herod to a devouring fox, he offered a metaphor to illustrate his work and ministry, and perhaps help us see him in the world today. He said, "*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*" The image of the protecting mother hen was a scene that would have been familiar to many in the agrarian Galilean countryside. Then as now wild, hungry foxes seek to ravage barnyard chicken coops. If a fox breaks into a hen house it's a terrifying sight. Apparently, a mother hen will try to shield her chicks from the fox by gathering them under her wings. The chicks are hard to corral, and the hen will invariably die in the effort. She stands firm against the fox, and gives her life for her young.

Jesus knew that he was going to die in Jerusalem. Mother hens seldom, if ever, survive when the fox attacks. Her only instinctual hope, I suppose, is that if the fox takes her it will leave her young alone. Jesus seems to have understood that his death would be saving in a similar way. By going to Jerusalem he would absorb into himself the full blast of what sin could render. When he stretched out his arms on the hard wood of the cross, he would offer himself, in obedience to God's will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world. If you want to see Jesus, you might look into the eyes of those who are offering themselves, not serving themselves. St. Paul would go so far as to suggest that we join in imitating those who live according to the cross of Christ. In these consecrated lives we see Jesus by the power of his Spirit.

If a mother hen and a fox don't quite do it for you as a metaphor of salvation, here's another from nature that is closer to home. Nearly two miles south of Grace Church on the other side of Broadway stands St. Paul's Chapel, the oldest church building in continuous use in Manhattan, having opened in 1766. On the non-Broadway side of St. Paul's is the church yard – a cemetery stretching to Church Street. Directly across from Church Street is the World Trade Center. On September 11, 2001 the twin towers of the World Trade Center – each 110 stories tall – came down with such force that other nearby buildings were either destroyed or severely damaged. Strangely, remarkably, St. Paul's emerged from that horrific day unscathed with the exception of one cracked window.

What accounts for the chapel's ability to stand firm? Not the sturdiness of its 18<sup>th</sup> century architecture. Not any cone of divine protection over houses of worship; other nearby churches were toppled. No, what many believe saved St. Paul's was a large, 70-year old American Sycamore tree that stood at the edge of the cemetery, between the chapel and the towers.<sup>3</sup> The tree with its branches stretched wide absorbed the stormy blast of debris and dust that came barreling across the street. The tree took the full force of destructive terror into itself, and in so doing gave its life. The deadly power unleashed by two collapsing skyscrapers eventually uprooted the tree and exposed it to the toxic dust that covered everything. It could not be saved.

If you want to see Jesus, you could do worse than to look at the noble tree that died so that a church might live. You might look at a mother hen defending her brood against the impossible odds of an invading fox. You might join in imitating the faithful people who stand firm against evil, who fight without fouling, and who offer up to Christ their will. And you might pray with the Psalmist (27), as we have recited this morning: *Though an army should encamp against me, yet my heart shall not be afraid. Though war should rise up against me, yet will I put my trust in him.*

+

---

<sup>1</sup> Leslie D. Weatherhead, *Personalities of the Passion*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1942, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> Talia Lakritz, "Biden Once Told Putin, 'I Don't Think You Have a Soul.'" *Insider*, March 10, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.911memorial.org/connect/blog/tree-gone-its-roots-enduring>