



**A Sermon from Dr. Jody Seymour, Senior Pastor
Davidson United Methodist Church
February 28, 2010**

The Sermon Text: Luke 13:31-35, Psalm 27

The Fox and the Hen: Facing Our Fears

In the tradition of Aesop's fables, I offer you the story of the fox and the hen: The fox looks up at a hen on her roost as he attempts to coax her down by telling her that the king has issued a new decree. "O, what is that," asks the hen? "Why, the king decreed that in the entire kingdom no animal shall harm another, so that means it is safe for you to come down here and spend some time with me."

"Ah, I see," said the hen. And then she stretches her neck toward the horizon and says, "Why look over there, here comes my master's dog." At that, the fox started to leave and the hen said, "Why are you leaving so quickly. You have nothing to fear from the dog. Remember the decree." The fox smiles and says, "Well, the master's dog may not have heard of the king's decree."

In our story today some Pharisees come to Jesus and offer him some advice reminding him of what he should fear. That fear is in the form of Herod, who has already beheaded John the Baptist for standing in Herod's way. Jesus does not hide out or run to some "perch" even though he describes Herod as "that fox."

Instead Jesus replies to this perceived fear by using the image of a hen who longs to protect her brood by taking them under her wings even as the fox approaches and signs of danger and destruction are all around. Herod is indeed a fox and a hungry one. He is a force to be feared. If you get in his way or criticize him he will cut off your head and yet he is cunning enough to rule Galilee for 40 years.

The scene you might remember most is when Jesus is brought before Pilate to be condemned and Pilate tries to do the old two-step by sending him to Herod since Jesus is from Herod's region of Galilee. The "fox" at first seems pleased to see Jesus, you know like a fox is "pleased" to see a hen.

Herod asks Jesus to perform a miracle for him. This scene was popularized in the rock-opera, "Jesus Christ Superstar" when Herod mocks Jesus with a song. I've always wanted to be in a presentation of "Superstar" because I not only like a lot of it but I grew up on this music. As a young pastor I often used the songs in "Superstar" to help people do bible study.

The only problem with me wanting to be in a production of this opera is that I really can't sing...but alas...if you have ever heard one of the renditions of "Herod's Song," it is the one part where you really don't have to be able to sing. Herod sort of says-sings the part in a mocking way...so I figure I could do it....ready:



Jesus, I am overjoyed to meet you face to face.
You've been getting quite a name all around the place.
Healing cripples, raising from the dead.
And now I understand you're God,
At least, that's what you've said.
So, you are the Christ, you're the great Jesus Christ.
Prove to me that you're divine; change my water into wine.
That's all you need do, then I'll know it's all true.
Come on, King of the Jews.
Jesus, you just won't believe the hit you've made around here.
You are all we talk about, the wonder of the year.
Oh what a pity if it's all a lie.
Still, I'm sure that you can rock the cynics if you tried.
So, you are the Christ, you're the great Jesus Christ.
Prove to me that you're no fool; walk across my swimming pool.
If you do that for me, then I'll let you go free.
Come on, King of the Jews.
I only ask what I'd ask any superstar.
What is it that you have got that puts you where you are?
I am waiting, yes I'm a captive fan.
I'm dying to be shown that you are not just any man.
So, if you are the Christ, yes the great Jesus Christ
Feed my household with this bread.
You can do it on your head.
Or has something gone wrong. Jesus, why do you take so long?
Oh come on, King of the Jews.
Hey! Aren't you scared of me Christ?
Mr. Wonderful Christ?
You're a joke. You're not the Lord.
You are nothing but a fraud.
Take him away.
He's got nothing to say!
Get out you King of the,
Get out King of the,
Oh get out you King of the Jews!
Get out of here!
Get out of here you,
Get out of my life.

Jesus has much to fear from this “fox” but he responds to those who warn him to run away that instead he must go to face his fear. Jesus uses the image of the hen protecting her brood as a way of facing that fear.



A hen will spread her wings and reveal the most vulnerable part of her body to protect her young. Jesus weeps over Jerusalem because he senses that his facing of this fear will have a cost, but he faces it anyway.

Psalm 27 tells of a God who will provide “shelter” in the face of fear. This Psalm of hope in the face of fear presents an image of a place to hide while collecting the resources to stand in the face of fear.

Last week we remembered that Jesus was tempted in part because we are tempted. Jesus came to be with us to face temptations. This week I offer you the reality that the same is true of fear. Jesus had to face fear...real fear.

So how did Jesus face fear? The story you hear today of the fox and the hen, not the Aesop one...the Jesus one... presents a pattern for facing our own fears. This is not just based on the bible. It is also based on the latest research from psychological studies about fear.

First of all fear is wired into us. I have told you in earlier sermons that the fear response is a natural way our body reacts to a perceived threat. Chemicals are released from a tiny organ called the amygdala which sets up our bodies for the flight or fight reaction.

The problem is that our “circuits” fire if the threat is real or imagined and if we are not mindful of this we end up in a constant “state” of fear. The adrenaline that flows through our bodies to help us take flight or fight ends up staying in our system and thus we are afraid too much.

So is it heretical to think that Jesus feels fear? That depends on if you allow Jesus to be human and not just divine. If “incarnation” means that God becomes one of us then why can’t we allow Jesus to feel what we feel? I have learned that too much divinity keeps people from even approaching the invitation to “be more like Jesus.”

I mean come on....Jesus? What if I told you that Jesus is divine because he is fully human; that Jesus fulfills in his humanness what God desires for all of us? If this is at least in part true then Jesus felt fear. Migaron McLaughlin said that, “People are made of flesh and blood and a miracle fiber called courage.” And Ambrose Redman reminded us that, “Courage is not the absence of fear but the judgment that something is more important than fear.”

This week I heard a presentation on the issue of domestic violence and was reminded that this is often not mentioned in church. So let me say that if you are afraid of anyone in your home...your husband...your wife...your father...your mother...something is very wrong. What is more important than your fear is that you should not be in that kind of relationship in the place called home. Your home should be a shelter not a prison.

What we hear today is that Jesus responds to fear in this scene as he is told that the fox Herod is out to get him. I have stood at the spot where all this was supposed to have happened. It is on the Mount of Olives overlooking the Kidron valley. Rising up from the



valley on the other side is the city of Jerusalem. From the Mount of Olives you literally look down over the city.

On this location there is built a small chapel called Dominus Flevit. These words mean, “The cry of the Lord” and the design of the building is meant to represent an inverted tear-drop because this is traditional place where Jesus weeps over the city and says, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem stoning the prophets and killing those who are sent to you. How I long to pull you under my wings as a hen does her brood but you will not have it.”

Jesus has reason to fear Herod and the powers of that holy city which will later see to his destruction but Jesus decides something is more important so he faces his fear by telling those who warn him of Herod and the coming terror, that he has a mission of healing and confronting the powers of fear that he must go and do.

Let’s get this straight. Jesus has his prayer book in his pocket. You can bet he knows those Psalms that include Psalm 27 that talk of facing fear and needing the shelter of the “wings” of God in times of fear. Jesus will use those Psalms for all sorts of occasions including one where the fears and terror of this world finally overtake him and he screams out a quote from another Psalm, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”

But what does Jesus do in the face of fear. This week I was again reminded of a system offered to face fear based on the research of Rhonda Britten. She offers 4 basic steps for dealing with fear which spell out the acronym RISK.

The first step is to release attachment to the outcome. Sometimes we are afraid to take the first step because we already project what will happen. This freezes us and thus we are simply afraid and never get to the outcome anyway. So the first step is to release expectations. Jesus seems to pretty much know what might happen if he faces Herod and others but he lets that go because he wants to help the “brood”...that ends up being us.

But hear clearly that this first step includes facing our fear rather than denying it. The next step is to invest fully in your intention. This is where a psalm or a person can help. Jesus gathers together his resources. He collects a small group not only to teach them but for his own support. That night we will remember soon when Jesus washes their feet, feeds them from his table and tells them that he longs to eat this meal with them, and later takes them with him to help support him in his hour of need as he prays...facing his fear and asking his “dad” for help tells us that Jesus needs support...so do we as we face fear. But this is a time to not allow for any excuses. Invest fully in your intention and gather support as you do.

The third step is to stand for truth. You must remember who you really are and not listen to what others say of you. Jesus asks them one day, “Who do people say that I am?” They give all kinds of answers but the final answer is who he really is. He is the “Christ”...the one who later will be called savior...Part of that saving is for Jesus to call on the God of the Psalms to stand with us in our fear and to remind us of who we are. This is the phase of no



complaining. It does no good to complain if you are going to face your fear because there will be those who think you foolish.

The final phase of facing fear is to keep kindness a priority. Facing fear means facing consequences that often mean that you fail to fully eliminate the cause of your fear when you face it. The first time you confront that person whom you are afraid of you might back down or you might have some of that sweaty palm, adrenaline rush fear reaction but you will have faced it as a future investment of facing it again....so no beating yourself up for not conquering your fear the first time.

Jesus weeps over the city. His followers at first support him and later deny, betray, and desert him. The account of Jesus in the garden shows a man who is having a fear reaction....If you want to keep Jesus so divine that he does not “sweat as with great drops of blood” then you are going to have to go get you one of those plastic sculptures of a Jesus who does not feel...and does not feel fear.

Jesus is afraid that night in the garden but he faces his own feelings and finally says, “Ok God, I’m afraid but let’s go out there and face those who would destroy all that I’ve tried to offer.” The hen goes out to face the fox.

Release expectations, invest fully in the intention, stand for truth, and keep kindness as a priority..RISK...no expectations, no excuses, no complaining, and no beating yourself up. If Jesus can do it so can you and I. Remember this is not a Jesus who is so distant and divine that he is not tempted and steps into fear with and for us.

So now comes your part... What are you afraid of? According to the latest Gallop poll and the findings of what most people are searching for on help with fears on the Google search engine the top 10 fears are:

01. Fear of flying
02. Fear of public speaking
03. Fear of heights
04. Fear of the dark
05. Fear of intimacy
06. Fear of death
07. Fear of failure
08. Fear of rejection
09. Fear of spiders
10. Fear of commitment

So I’ll do this with you and then we’ll try to practice what I just preached. Want to know one of my top fears? Well it might surprise you. You notice that near the top and sometimes on the top is fear of public speaking. You say, “Come on, you do this most every week.” But like the bomb squad guy who knows the fear every time he steps toward a live bomb and knows though his hands may shake and his pulse races that he is called to do what he does so



I have a strange fear when it comes to what I do....Remember courage is not the absence of fear but the judgment that something is more important than your fear.

So here is my fear...I've been good at doing this for 38 years. I would not be here with you if others did not think I was good at this. I know I have a gift and work hard using my gift because although this is not a bomb, what I'm dealing with is some powerful stuff; this gospel and this message...so what is my fear?...My fear is that I will lose my fastball...that one day I'll not be able to put it together like I did "last week"...Some weeks I sit in front of the books and the computer and I think, "I've said all I can say...I'm not sure I have it...what if this week it is just average?"

So what did I preach today that I along with you can practice? Remember "RISK"...release attachment to expectations, invest fully in the outcome, stand for the truth of who you really are, and keep kindness a priority by not beating yourself up. Facing my fear tells me that I never really have any idea what a sermon will "do" to you or for you...it's really up to what God will do with what I do. I am called to invest in offering the best I can bring to the task. I can only be who I am at this point in time. And if I too listen to the Psalm I must remember that I can stand under the shelter of those wings that promise to hold me just as I offer that divine presence that can hold you.

So Jesus faces his fear. He walks toward the "fox" and lets expectations go where they may. He invests all of himself in the outcome, which is to be with us in our journey. He makes no excuses when he disappoints those who want him to do things differently. He faces the failure of others expectations. And he offers kindness in the face of misunderstanding when he does such things as wash the feet of those who want to be kings only to find out they are to be servants.

Now what about you? With the help of one who offers you the shelter of his wings can you step toward your fear? Do this with me. Close your eyes and picture your fear. Let go of the control that would make some desired outcome happen. Believe in the intention of what you need to do. Be true to who you really are because God already knows it. And be kind to yourself if you do not fully do away with your fear the first time.

Though your fears like enemies stand against you God is your hiding place. There is one who loves you so much that he became human like you and me in order to feel our fears and to offer us a place of shelter near to him. You can be strong in the shelter of those abiding arms that like wings of a mother hen long to be a place where you and your God can face your fear.