

Jesus is warned to flee because Herod wants to kill him. Do you see in Luke 13:31 who it is that warns him? It's the Pharisees. They are usually portrayed in a dark light in the gospels but here they worry about Jesus' safety. Jesus refers to Herod as a fox and that is not meant to be an endearing comment. Herod's desire to kill Jesus is readily understandable as we think of what we have heard about him so far. In Luke 3:18-20 we read that Herod imprisoned John the Baptist. Herod was King of Judea, as noted in Luke 1:5, which made him the middle man between the Hebrew population and the Roman government. The Romans expected Herod to maintain order among the people. John, with his baptizing at the Jordan River and the great crowds he was attracting was stirring up Messianic talk. If great crowds gathered expecting a Messiah on the horizon they might very well start a revolt against the Roman occupational troops and Herod would have none of that. After he imprisoned John the Baptist he quickly found out that John was not going to quiet down. Therefore, Herod had John beheaded. Now Herod has his eyes set on Jesus.

Jesus vividly characterizes Herod as “that fox,” a metaphor that points to Herod as being sly, cunning, and voraciously destructive. In response, Jesus asserts that he has nothing to fear from Herod. We can take a clue from Jesus whenever a “fox” visits our life. Jesus did not become a doormat in the presence of an adversary but very assertively declares that he will accomplish his good purposes even though Herod thinks otherwise.

Jesus maintains a pragmatic realism and an ongoing optimism that emerge from his clarity of vision. Jesus knew that what he said and what he did would bring about both spiritual and political upheaval. The actions of Jesus would unnerve political folk like Herod and Pontius Pilate as well as the religious establishment that operated in the midst of the status quo. Therefore, Jesus anticipated negative reactions as Herod is reported to have had in our gospel lesson. Jesus knew he was not the first and he knew he was not going to be the last to evoke negative reactions from the power elite. John the Baptist hit a nerve and had his head cut off. Most, if not all, of the prophets that have books named after them in the Old Testament had their lives threatened because they publicly proclaimed that the status quo of the religious, political and business power brokers lacked righteous, ethical and just practices. Challenging the ways of the powerful is difficult in 2019 and much more so 2,000 years ago in Palestine because it meant you were silenced in one fashion or another. The seat of power in Israel is Jerusalem. Therefore, Jesus cries out in our gospel lesson today,

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to you.”

Jesus knew that opposition would rise up as he shared his message and the crowds grew around him. Jesus knew the dynamics of his day. Therefore, he knew that eventually he would be killed but he also knew that his message would live on.

We see pragmatic realism and ongoing optimism in Jesus and those qualities emerge from his clarity of vision. When we know what God wants us to do then we can endure challenges and maintain optimism as we pursue our vision. Maybe it is better to say that a visionary doesn't just endure the challenges but the visionary anticipates and even welcomes the challenges and challengers.

Can you wrap your mind around that concept? Anticipating and even welcoming challenges is the unique mindset that Jesus and the prophets maintained. The visionary understands that what looks like defeat can in fact be the foundation for victory. From all outward appearances the power structure that mounted against Jesus was victorious as they ruthlessly crucified Jesus on the cross. But our presence here, in a church of Jesus Christ, clearly states that there is something greater than outward and objective results of a particular moment in time.

Jesus maintains a pragmatic realism and an ongoing optimism because he had clarity of vision. What was that vision? The apostle Paul concisely captures that vision in his words recorded in Romans 8:35f.

What then are we to say about these things? Who will separate us from the love of God?

Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate from the love of God...

When we have the clarity of vision that God is at our side then we can do the right thing knowing that challenges will emerge in the process. Jesus knew Herod would seek to kill him and he is ready to take on that fox. Jesus, essentially says to Herod, "bring it on."

I thought that attitude was wonderfully portrayed by Rocky Balboa in the string of Rocky movies that came out in the 1970 and '80's. If you are young and have never seen the movie Rocky you can capture their flavor in the Creed movies that have been releases in the last couple of years. Yet, I invite you to download the original Rocky. Rocky was a small time boxer who gets an unprecedented opportunity to fight the world champion. The spirit of an unflinching response to the "fox" is captured in the image of Rocky Balboa. Rocky has taken an unmerciful beating at the hands of Apollo Creed the reigning heavyweight world champion. He has been knocked to the mat again. The ring official is counting to ten for the knockout and Apollo is dancing around the ring, showing off to the massive crowd, in a triumphant fashion. At about 8 in the count Rocky struggles to his feet. Apollo turns and sees Rocky is getting up and he can't believe his eyes. Rocky's swollen face has multiple cuts and bruises but there is not a hint of fear in his eyes. Rocky places his gloves together and motions to Apollo to "bring it on."

Rocky had a pragmatic realism and but an unflinching optimism because he knew boxing was his call in life. When we know God is at our side we can face the challenge and say, "Bring it on." When the poor health report is at our door-step we can say "bring it on." When we were not selected or we lost a job because of downsizing we can say "bring it on." We can say "bring it on" because we know that as we face a challenge we will emerge stronger from the process. Folk came to Jesus and say that Herod is after him. Jesus responds by saying, in effect, "bring it on."

Did you know what happens in the brain when the "fox" or challenge comes into our life and our response is "why me" or "this is unfair" and we become anxious or fearful? Our brain releases chemicals that bring about depression and therefore sets us up for not only an initial blow but also an experience of ongoing defeat. When the "fox" enters our life it is often arbitrary, unfair, and induces initial reactions of fear and anxiety. Yet, do you know what happens in the brain when the "fox" comes into our life and our response is "bring it on." It releases chemicals that make us agile, quick to think, and visionary. "Bring it on" is a statement of faith. We know that we might end up like Rocky Balboa and lose this particular fight but we know that as we continue to draw on the resources that God provides that the battle can be won. Jesus knew that there was nothing Herod, the religious elite, Pilate or any other person with ill-intent could do that would ultimately defeat his good purposes. Yes, they could kill his body but never his spirit.

Christian discipleship is about developing a pragmatic realism that "foxes" are part and parcel of life. In addition, being a disciple of Christ means we maintain ongoing optimism that emerges from our faith that knows that God-given resources are available to us for dealing with the foxes and challenges of life. The ability to anticipate and even welcome "Herod" and other foxes in our lives is strength in and of itself.

Let me conclude with a familiar story of one person that embraced the pragmatic realism and the ongoing optimism of Jesus. He is a shining example of repeatedly responding with a "bring it on" attitude that reflects a deep faith in God's presence and support.

When he was seven years old his family was forced out of their home on a legal technicality and he had to work to help support the family. At age nine his mother died. At twenty-two he lost his job as a store clerk. He wanted to go to Law School but his prerequisite classes did not measure up to the standard. At twenty-three he went into debt to become a partner at a small store. At twenty-six his business partner died which left him with a huge debt that took years to repay. Do you see a few "foxes" and challenges in this young man's life?

Well, he maintained pragmatic realism that “foxes” are part and parcel of life and amazingly enough he held a firm grip to ongoing optimism. Good for him because the challenges kept coming.

At twenty-eight, after dating a young lady for four years, he proposed and she said “no.” At thirty-seven, on his third attempt, he was elected to Congress. But two years later he failed to be re-elected. At forty-one his four year old son died.

At forty-five he ran for the Senate and lost. At forty-seven he failed as a Vice-Presidential candidate. At forty-nine he ran for the Senate again and lost again. You think he might have got a hint to try something else, but no, he plunged forward.

At fifty-one he was elected President of the United States. As you know by now, his name was Abraham Lincoln. A man that many consider the greatest leader our country ever had. He knew “foxes,” challenges, and heart wrenching disappointments were out there and he repeatedly said, “Bring it on!”