

Staring down the fox

Luke 13:31-35

February 21, 2010

Where are you going?

Nowhere ...

Really? Do you really want to tell me that you're going nowhere?

Let's try that again! Where are you going? In what direction is your life pointing? Toward graduation? Toward graduate school? Toward finding a job? Toward keeping your job? Toward retirement?

But once you graduate or find a job or retire, then what? Then where are you going? Or are you past all that, not really thinking anymore about where you are going but about where you have been?

Still, where are you going? Does your life have a direction? A goal? A purpose? A destination? Are you following a path, any path, or are you just going wherever it is life happens to take you?

Where was Jesus going? To Jerusalem. Jesus was going to Jerusalem. Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus "made up his mind and set out on his way to Jerusalem." And what was waiting for Jesus in Jerusalem? Death. Jesus set out on a journey that would take him to Jerusalem, into the very presence of those already plotting to kill him.

It was an actual journey that Jesus took, but in Luke's gospel, it is a metaphorical journey, too. It was a journey from Samaria to Jerusalem, but also a journey from the streets and hillsides where Jesus taught and healed to the cross on which he would hang, a journey from adulation to accusation, from acclaim to rejection, from praise to condemnation, from life into death.

That's the path Jesus took. It's a hard path, a path marked by suffering and sacrifice, a path that leads to the cross ... and beyond! Because the cross is not Jesus' final destination. Jerusalem is not Jesus' final destination.

In fact, it would be more accurate to say that where Jesus was going had more to do with the way itself than the destination. Where was Jesus going? He was following the path, the path of obedience, all the way. He was going to wherever God called him to go. He was doing whatever God called him to do. Obedience, following the path of obedience, that was the important thing.

So, back to my first question. Where are you going? Are you going with Jesus? Are you committed, too, to following the path of obedience, wherever it may take you? Are you going to wherever God is calling you to go, doing whatever God is calling you to do?

What is God calling you to do? It's no mystery. God is calling you to do justice, to show mercy, to walk humbly in God's way. God is calling you to love your neighbor as you love yourself, to share what you have with the poor, to be a witness to the truth by what you say and what you do, to make peace, to make shalom. God is calling you to set aside your own wants and needs, to walk everyday the path that leads to the cross, to walk everyday the path that leads through the cross. God is calling you to follow Jesus.

It's a daunting journey, a hard way to go, a path filled with hazards and pitfalls. Some of us may never choose to start down that path in the first place. Some of us may start down that path, but be distracted or diverted along the way. Some of us may abandon the path for an easier one or one seeming more pleasant to follow. Some of us may turn around and go back, or stop to sit down and rest and consider our options for a while, a while that turns into a long while, a long while that turns into a permanent stopover.

Jesus faced the same hazards, the same pitfalls. the same temptations, on his journey to Jerusalem. One of the first obstacles in Jesus' path was fear. Luke's gospel reports that some Pharisees came to Jesus and said,

You must get out of here and go somewhere else, because Herod wants to kill you ...

Did the Pharisees really mean to warn Jesus? Were they genuinely concerned for his safety? Or were they merely using the specter of a menacing Herod as a convenient way to get Jesus out of way, to get Jesus out of their way?

It's hard to say, but their motives really don't matter, because the upshot is the same. Jesus hears that Herod is out to get him and must decide whether to run to someplace safe, someplace out of Herod's reach, or continue on his way at the risk of his life. He must decide whether to listen to fear and abandon the path, or take courage and go forward.

Fear's power is the power of imagination. Fear does not directly do you harm, but fear hurts you by changing your behavior. That is the power of fear, the power to change behavior.

Fear can paralyze you, stopping you in your tracks, freezing your will, stifling your strength.

Fear can make you run, far and fast, away from where you meant to be, away from where you want to be.

Fear can make you play it safe, not taking risks, not sticking your neck out. not trying anything new, not going anywhere that is not already familiar.

Fear shrinks your world, smaller and smaller and smaller as fear has its way, depriving you of all the rich and rewarding experiences this world has to offer, and depriving the world of you.

Fear makes you stifle your own life.

What are you afraid of?

Maybe you're afraid of failing, afraid of letting people down, afraid of not measuring up, afraid of being exposed as just not that good. So you do your best to keep expectations low, your own expectations and the expectations others have of you. You play it safe, not trying anything bold or ambitious or innovative.

Maybe you're afraid of conflict. So you do your best to keep everybody happy. You make sure you don't say or do anything controversial, anything confrontational. For the sake of keeping the peace, you make yourself innocuous, lukewarm, middle-of-the-road. You turn your back on what you really believe and what you really want and you let people see very little of who you really are.

Maybe you're afraid of being left out, of not being included. So you do your best to fit in. You talk about the things everybody else seems to want to talk about. You care about the things everybody else seems to want to care about. You avoid doing or saying anything that might possibly cause offense.

Maybe you're afraid of missing out, afraid of missing the boat, afraid of not getting your fair share, afraid of not having what is out there for you to have. Maybe you're afraid that if you take following Jesus too seriously, it might cost you, might make you miss opportunities to make money, to get ahead, to do what you want to do, afraid that when all is said and done, you won't have anything to show for it.

Maybe you're afraid of dying, afraid of what accident or disease or old age might take from you. And so, in your fear of death, you die before you die, by not living.

The power of fear is the power to change behavior ...

I would share my idea or my talent, but I'm afraid of what people might think ...

I used to talk to strangers on the street, but now it's just too dangerous ...

I would be more generous, but I'm afraid of being used ...

I would talk about my faith, but I don't want to cause offense ...

I would tell you I love you, but that might just seem weird ...

I would show mercy to my enemies, but I'm afraid they would simply take advantage of me ...

I would speak out about the issues that concern me, but I don't want to upset anybody or start an argument ...

I would take a stand against injustice, but I don't want to get in trouble or take any unnecessary risks ...

I would go to Haiti, but, you know ...

The power of fear is the power to change behavior. The power of fear is the power to limit our options and to divert us from the path of obedience.

But fear had no power over Jesus. The Pharisees told him Herod wanted to kill him. They told him the lion was growling! And Jesus said, "Go and tell that fox ..."

Tell that fox! Jesus looks at Herod and sees not a lion, but a fox! And what do you have to fear from a fox? A fox might steal from you, if you let him, but he's not going to eat you up! Jesus stares down the fox, robbing him of the only power the fox has which is the power to fool, the power to make a fool of you.

Do you see that power before which you tremble? Do you see that fear that intimidates you and keeps you from doing what God wants you to do? It is nothing! Just look past the growl, and you'll see the face of a fox!

Jesus puts fear into perspective. If you want to tremble, don't tremble before Herod or anyone or anything like him. Tremble before the Lord! Tremble before the One to whom all glory and majesty and might belong! Don't let a fox scare you! Don't let fear change your life and turn you out of the path!

Jesus called Herod a fox and assured Herod he intended to go right on doing what he was doing.

Go and tell that fox, "I am driving out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I shall finish my work ..."

Jesus will not be deterred from his work until it's done.

Now Herod's threat was real. Once Jesus did reach Jerusalem, Herod was among those who tried him and ultimately sent him to his death. But Jesus didn't let fear turn him aside. Jesus didn't let fear change his direction. Jesus didn't die before he died. Only death itself finally stopped him, not the fear of death. And, you know, if we follow the path through the cross to the other side, we will find that death itself could not stop him either!

If you do choose to follow Jesus, there will be risks. It will cost you. But don't die before you die. Don't let fear change your life. Don't let fear dissuade you from doing what God calls you to do.

Stay on the path. Stay on the path of obedience, all the way. That path may well lead to the cross, for you too as it did for Jesus, but it will lead you through the cross, too. And you know, don't you, what lies on the other side of the cross?