

Sermon

21 February 2016

West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Text: Luke 13:31-35

About 2,300 years ago a young man by the name of Alexander walked into the history books when he led his army on an 11,000 mile journey from his home in Greece all the way to India.

This march wasn't just impressive because it was far-reaching, but because it was unstoppable. Alexander didn't just travel 11,000 miles, he fought his way through it and never once met an enemy that he didn't defeat. The only reason he didn't go further was because his soldiers became homesick and they wanted to return to Greece.

Alexander's journey was far-reaching in another way as well – some 2,300 years later it still affects us today. That's remarkable when you consider that Alexander never even set foot in Scotland!

His far-reaching ventures made Greek culture and language the standard of the world for over three centuries. Because of that we have many Greek words in our language – words like biology, philosophy, telephone, and telescope, to name but a few. Our art, architecture, and

democratic form of government have all been greatly influenced by the Greeks as well.

If Alexander hadn't conquered the world, the Persians (most modern day Iranians) would probably have conquered it, and our language, art, and government today would have a Persian tinge, not a Greek one.

What Alexander accomplished is impressive, especially when you consider that he did it all by age 33! It's no wonder he's called Alexander the Great.

About 330 years after Alexander the Great another 33 year old man embarked on a journey. Like Alexander's march this one was unstoppable. Distance-wise this march wasn't nearly as far-reaching as Alexander's (only covering about 75 miles), but on a different level this journey was so far-reaching that it changed all aspects of life for all people, forever.

Looking at it in retrospect, I think God used Alexander's journey to prepare the world for Jesus' journey. Through Alexander God put a common language and good roads in place so that the news of Jesus' death and resurrection could spread quickly throughout the world.

What Alexander did has affected people for centuries, but what Jesus did affects every person that ever lived – both those who came before him and those of us who live after him. Jesus' march is unmatched because he didn't just go to Jerusalem; he marched all the way to hell and back. And unlike Alexander who marched to make a name for himself, Jesus marched to make a name for us – “Children of God.”

And now, for 7 weeks, during this time of Lent, we embark on a journey with Jesus. A spiritual journey, from Galilee to Jerusalem, a journey during which we remember what he did for us, and why, and what that means for our journeys through life today.

In the passage we just read, Jesus gets warned by the Pharisees to leave and go somewhere else, because Herod wants to kill him.

But Jesus wasn't going to be put off the mission he was sent on by God. So he told them that he was going to carry on doing what he was doing – slowly travelling to Jerusalem, healing people, touching lives and changing people along the way.

He called Herod a fox – crafty and sly – and then referred to himself as a hen, who wants to gather her chicks under her wings.

When I saw what the lectionary text was for this Sunday and I started preparing my sermon, I decided that I wasn't going to elaborate on the hen and chicks, because I have preached about this image once before - it's an image that's also used in the Old Testament to refer to God. But it was only when it dawned on me that Luke very cleverly used the image of a fox and a hen in the same passage for a *reason*, that I decided that this imagery is way too strong to just read over and not talk about.

Because foxes catch hens and eat them.

And Herod (along with many other people) probably thought that he was going to get rid of Jesus in a heartbeat. He was just as sly as a fox. But he didn't keep account of God and his plans for humanity through Jesus...

Perhaps the role Jesus plays as a hen can be best understood from this story I read: After a forest fire swept through the Yellowstone National Park in the USA a few years ago, a park ranger went out to survey the damage. As he walked through the woods he came across the burnt carcass of a bird huddled at the base of a tree. It didn't make sense. Why didn't this bird fly away to freedom when the fire threatened? When he nudged the carcass with his boot three chicks came scurrying out from underneath it!

Now it made sense. The hen had not flown away because that would have meant certain death for her chicks. Therefore in an act of love she stood over her chicks shielding them from the fire with her wings even though it meant a horrible death for her.

And that is exactly what Jesus did for us!

When a mother hen senses danger, she calls her chicks and they come to hide under her wings straight away. No chick will ever ignore that warning call – they always run to safety, before the fox or the fire comes.

On his journey to Jerusalem, Jerusalem that ironically means “city of peace”, Jesus walked and called people to come shelter under his wings. He opened his arms wide and offered safety to everyone he met.

Sadly, In Jerusalem, lots of the chicks didn't recognize the hen and sided with the fox. But this mother hen never gave up. Jesus gave the ultimate sacrifice – his life on the cross – hanging there with his arms open wide, still offering protection to all those who believed in him.

Like the hen in the story he died to save his chicks, all of us. Even the ones who sided with the fox! But that wasn't the end of him. The fox didn't win. Although he went through fire, although he walked the journey end-out as Jesus knew he had to, God brought him back to life and decided that none of his children will ever have to face the foxes of this world on their own again.

So he sent us a different bird, a dove, his Holy Spirit, to be with us all the time. To guide us and to guard us on our journeys through life – to show us where to go and to keep us company along the way.

What Jesus did not only changed history, it changed *us*. He is the hen, we are the chicks.

Our journey through life isn't always easy.

So often we are vulnerable. We can feel alone so quickly. Sometimes things happen to us that we just cannot understand, and we can so easily start falling down that slippery slope of "why me?", or "I can't cope with this"...

But this morning I want to urge you: Just don't go there! If you feel alone, abandoned, worried, devastated, hopeless – just stop for a minute. Stand still and listen – and you will hear God calling you to come shelter under his wings.

There are very many sly foxes in our lives, but we shouldn't ever allow them to get the better of us. We should follow Jesus' example, look the fox – who/whatever it is – in the eye, and say: "I must keep going today

and tomorrow and the next day”, because I’m not on this journey alone. God is with me, he has a plan for me, and he will keep me safe against the foxes and the fires.

The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said: “A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.” Let’s take that first step today, the step towards the rest of our lives, with the boldness of Alexander the Great, but with the heart of Jesus. We’re not here to conquer, but to welcome and include.

There’s lots of room under Jesus’ wings, so let’s move a little closer to each other, and see how absolutely amazing our journey through life can be!

Amen