

Jesus mocks Herod (Luke 13:31-35)

When we hear Jesus retort, “Tell that fox....,” we have to keep in mind the litany of intersections between Jesus, his followers, and the Herodian dynasty.

by [Eric D. Barreto](#)

March 15, 2019

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“Tell that fox...” is Jesus’ bold response when he hears that Herod is seeking his life. This is not the first or last time we hear the power of the Herods evoked by Luke. With the Herodian family’s power comes the threat of violence over Jesus and his followers.

Luke strikingly synchronizes his Gospel with the Herodian dynasty. The days when Elizabeth and Zechariah learn of the birth of John are marked by King Herod’s rule (1:5). So also the beginning of Jesus’ preaching and healing begins under the shadow of another Herod’s rule (3:1). Herod imprisons John (3:19) and executes him (9:7-9); at both points, Herod also grows concerned about how Jesus’ ministry might challenge his own corrupt rule.

Jesus faces a trial before Herod, who has been wanting to meet this Jesus because he hoped Jesus would “perform some sign” (23:8). This Herod has entirely missed the purpose and meaning of Jesus’ healings and signs. They are not a show for the empire but an embodied rebuke of its arrogations. Herod and Pilate become erstwhile enemies as they hand off the decision over Jesus’ earthly destiny (23:12), a relationship evoked in Peter’s charging both Herod and Pilate with Jesus’ unjust

execution (Acts 4:27).

In Acts 12, yet another Herod's grisly death by worms accompanies his persecution of the disciples and his arrogant reception of divine praise.

When we hear Jesus retort, "Tell that fox....," we have to keep in mind this litany of intersections between Jesus, his followers, and the powerful members of the Herodian dynasty. Jesus compares Herod to a fox to imply his craftiness, a craftiness Jesus mocks here. There is no need to be coy or crafty, Jesus indicates.

Why? First because Jesus is going to continue exorcising demons and healing the afflicted. In Luke's telling, such activities are not just signs of Jesus' power but embodiments of the good news. Those cured of demons and sickness alike are restored to their neighbors and their communities. These miracles are not just moments of individual restoration but the stitching back together of communities previously torn asunder by chaotic, seemingly uncontrollable forces.

Second, Jesus points ahead to his resurrection, a rebuke of the empire's power to execute the innocent. In short, though we do not hear what concerned Herod about Jesus' ministry, we catch a clue in Jesus' response. It is the abundance of life that Jesus brings in his wake that most threatens Herod, the fox.

But why would Herod have to fear such good news for the hurting, the downtrodden, the sick? Perhaps because such good news displaces the authority of the powerful. Life and death are no longer imperial prerogatives. The promise of resurrection is born on the shoulders of the executed; it pours forth from the calloused hands of a Galilean prophet.

Reading these texts from the powerful perches many western readers inhabit makes this story's interpretation both complicated and utterly necessary. With our wealth and our political voice, we may neglect how we have been consumed by the imperial lie that safety, prosperity, and health belong to the worthy. This is the cunning lie of foxes like Herod throughout the ages. In Jesus' hand, life belongs to all, to be sure, but especially to those crushed by the powerful who reside among those of us so zealous to protect what we have.

"Tell that fox..." is not just a witty jab. It's a thumb in the eye of the same kinds of imperial power that will try to end Jesus' life. It's not just bravery but confidence in God's promises. "Tell that fox..." is a preview of the resurrection's claim to victory over death.