

“Something Other Than Fight or Flight”

Luke 13:31-35

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We have all heard the term “fight or flight” and have some sense of what it means. It is a way of describing our response to a threat, real or perceived. We can attack the threat in anger or we can run away in fear. We can fight or flee and how we respond is largely a function of our personal and familial history.

If we have been told that anger is a bad emotion or we have observed people very early on in life using anger destructively, our instinct may be to avoid it at all costs, even though we’re going to feel what we feel. Emotions, in and of themselves, are neither good nor bad. It’s what we do with them that matters. But we instinctively flee if we have negative associations with anger and confrontation.

If we have positive associations with confrontation, though, our instinct may be to head straight toward a threat either with the assumption that we can overcome it or with the conviction that we’d rather stand up and fight. I had a colleague like this in another setting. He always moved toward danger, never held on to feelings, said he was a carrier of emotion, which meant he let it out on those around him and thus would not suffer from holding anything in. He was a fine colleague; this part of him just created some interesting experiences.

We all have some tendency to fight or flee, though circumstances can weigh into our response, or at least should. My colleague whose instinct was to fight would have been better served to flee the day a man confronted him with a gun, demanding money. Instead, he defiantly told the man he couldn’t understand what he was saying until he raised the gun he had not seen. Specific threats should alter our instinctive response, but we all have one, and it is to fight or flee.

Yet in the text we have read today from Luke 13 Jesus doesn’t fight or flee. As the story begins, some Pharisees come and warn him

that Herod wants to kill him, and that he needs to get away. We may find this odd, since we think of Pharisees as the bad guys. Our instinct is to boo whenever they come on the stage. But not all Pharisees are hostile toward Jesus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee and Acts 15:5 refers to some believers who belong to a sect of Pharisees. Pharisees are reformers of the law, like Jesus, so they have some common ground with him.

Anyway, they warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him and make no mistake, this is a real threat. This is Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of the region, the man who marries his brother's wife and has John the Baptist beheaded. Jesus would be wise to flee. Fighting is not an option, unless he conjures up some divine power, he has no military support. But he chooses something other than fight or flight.

He says, "Go and tell that fox for me..." "fox" being a term in Greek, *alopex*, which refers to craftiness or slyness. Its root in Hebrew, *sual*, is used to describe foolish prophets in Ezekiel 13:4. "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'" Then, he goes on to offer a lament for Jerusalem, a city that kills the prophets sent to it. He says he has longed to gather the city's children as a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings, but the city is not willing.

So, how does Jesus respond to this very real threat? He neither fights nor flees but simply continues doing what he has been doing. As we saw in last week's account of temptations in the wilderness, we see again in this story that Jesus has a very clear sense of his identity and calling, and he is going to be about his work no matter what. He is not going to stop prematurely and run away in fear. He will finish what he has started and then move on as he has planned all along.

But he does something else here with this lament over Jerusalem. It is a city that has rejected many prophets. It's not the whole city that is to blame, and we certainly don't want to blame all Jewish people for Jesus' death. He is Jewish as are his disciples. But the city has a history

of rejecting prophets, and so we might think that Jesus will shift into full-out fight mode at this point and ask God to rain down fire!

But he does not. He extends compassion. He feels sadness at their lack of faith, not anger. So, he will neither fight nor flee in the end. He will go even further than lamentation in extending compassion. He will lay down his life for them.

Barbara Brown Taylor described matters eloquently in an old issue of *The Christian Century* (February 25, 1986).

If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus' lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world --wings spread, breast exposed --but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand. ...

... Jesus won't be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first; which he does, as it turns out. He slides up on her one night in the yard while all the babies are asleep. When her cry wakens them, they scatter.

She dies the next day where both foxes and chickens can see her --wings spread, breast exposed -- without a single chick beneath her feathers. It breaks her heart . . . but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand.

As I say, it is an eloquent description of the distinctive way Jesus responds to a threat. It is a provoking image, the image of Jesus grieving over Jerusalem, offering all he has to them, even his life.

So, what are we to make of this? It is a different kind of response, something other than fight or flight. It is a different kind of power that Jesus reveals, a different kind of strength, but what is the message for us other than the obvious gift of salvation that comes through the cross?

One message here is that this is who Jesus is and thus this is who God is. Since we believe that in Jesus we see the face God, whenever we examine an image of Jesus, we are examining an image of God. This means that God and Christ are clear about who they are and thus not subject to the whims of anyone nor overly reactive to us. It also means that God's character is defined by neither anger nor fear but compassion.

This may seem obvious, but it is not the image many have. Many think they want to believe in an angry God who is just waiting to zap someone; only people who deserve it, of course; which means their enemies. And some, like the terrorists of all stripes who distort all religions, grow weary of waiting and take matters into their own hands. But if Jesus is a reflection of God, indeed, God incarnate, this is not who God is. God is the one who feels sadness for those who are the most broken, the one who extends compassion, the one who seeks to gather the wandering wounded like a mother hen gathering her chicks.

Furthermore, to state the obvious, this is a female image of God. Not only is there a counter-narrative to the biblical narrative that only men can be leaders, but also can women like Miriam and Deborah and Mary and Phoebe; there is also a counter-narrative to the biblical narrative that God is only viewed in male imagery. To be sure, God is more often called Father, which is not a great surprise in a male-dominated culture, but in this passage God is viewed as a mother hen. In Hosea 11, God is presented as a mother lifting up Israel as a child to her cheek to kiss or perhaps to nurse, and there are other female images in the Bible.

So, is God a woman? No, but nor is God a man. God is not a human being, God is God, personal but Holy Other. And the truth is scripture uses many images of God that are not human at all – God is a rock, a mighty fortress, a place of refuge, our light. It's fine to use images to help us understand the nature of God. Only the mystics can relate to God without images. The key is that we not equate our images

with God. There is a biblical word for that – idolatry – and it is not a good word. Using different images can help us to avoid idolatry and broaden our understanding as well.

There is an old issue of the comic strip *Non Sequitur* in which a robed dog with a halo stands behind a heavenly lectern in the clouds as a small balding man looks on in bewilderment. The dog, a German Shepherd I think, says, “Well, yes... considering you people have been spelling my name backward all this time, I imagine this would come as a bit of a surprise to you...” Is God really a dog? Well, is God really a man or woman? No one image contains all that God is.

So, God is ever more than any one image, but what we see in Luke 13 is helpful as we appropriate multiple images. It’s not the whole story, but part of the story is that God is like a mother hen gathering her chicks, extending compassion to the wayward, willing to do whatever it takes to help them, even lay down life. It is a provoking image of a God who possesses great strength – just a different kind of strength.

But there is another message for us here. Not only do we see who God is, we see who we are called to be. Jesus doesn’t just show us the face of God, he shows us our character. He calls us not just to believe in him but to follow him in a way of life. There are many aspects of this life. No one story tells us everything. But in this story we learn that we are to be self-defined, to know and be who we are, and we are to extend compassion to all, even those who harm us. When we are threatened, we are called to respond with something other than fight or flight.

In the realm of self-definition, we need not feel overwhelmed. This is a liberating concept. We don’t have to live up to anyone else’s standard. We have our own built in already by God. I think of the story Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel used to tell about the great Rebbe Zushya who on his deathbed lamented how little he had accomplished with his life. “Rebbe, are you afraid of the judgment soon to come?” someone asked. He almost said, “Yes,” but paused before doing so and said, “No. For when I appear before the Almighty – may the Divine Name be forever blessed – I will not be asked, ‘Why were you not

Moses?’ I will only be asked, ‘Why were you not Zushya?’” (as retold by Robert McAfee Brown in Terence Tilley’s *Story Theology*, p. xiv).

So, we are to be who we are, use the gifts God has given us, and then no matter how we use them, we are called to extend compassion to others like Jesus’ lamenting the condition of Jerusalem, longing for its redemption, like a mother hen gathering her chicks. This is the challenging part of the story. We may in time be able to get our minds around the idea of God extending compassion to those who oppose God and hurt us, though we begin like Jonah, wanting God to destroy all the Ninevites. What was the national mood after 9-11? How do we feel about the spouse who betrays us? Do we want to cook dinner for the co-worker who undercuts us and threatens our livelihood? But our being the mother hen, being like Jesus in this way, forgiving even those who are putting him to death while he is on the cross? That’s a bit too much.

In fact, that’s foolishness! Isn’t it? Won’t people just take advantage of our kindness? Maybe. But how do we know? We know how the world works now. How will it ever be different unless someone chooses to be different? And aren’t we called to be different?

I think of the fourth-century Bishop of Antioch John Chrysostom who in a postbaptismal instruction lamented the fact that “many after their baptism (live) more carelessly than the uninitiated, having nothing in particular to distinguish them in their way of life (Finn, *The Liturgy of Baptism in the Baptismal Instructions of St. John Chrysostom*, p. 42).”

That is one of the greatest challenges of convincing even our own children of the validity of the Gospel, much less the world around us. Is there anything different about our lives because of our relationship to Jesus? If there is not, none of our words about the Gospel will matter. There are many ways we might assert our difference but none more persuasive or more needed than the practice of compassion. How might the church grow if people saw this at work in our lives rather than all the bitterness, division and judgment the church so often projects?

“Jesus won’t be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm.” That’s who he calls us to be as well.