

The Fox
Matthew 8:14-20

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

Tonight we begin our season of Lent. This year the Lenten theme is the image of Christ as seen through some animals of the Bible. Over the next few weeks we will hear from the Donkey seeing the Peaceful Savior, the Dove seeing the angry savior, the Camel seeing the warning savior, the Hen seeing the Grieving Savior, the vulture seeing the coming savior, the colt witnessing the sacrificial savior, the lamb the forgiving Savior, and of course the rooster being there to see witness the disowned savior. But tonight, on Ash Wednesday we hear from the fox.

So what do you all know of foxes. I'll tell you what I know, there is the gray fox and the red fox and they live in dens underground. From old wives tales we learn that foxes are intelligent; just remember the old adage – "smart like a fox." From Saturday morning cartoons – especially from the looney tune gang, I learned that foxes can sneak into chicken coops right by fog-horn-leg horn and old Elmer Fudd and steal chickens. And that is pretty much all I know about foxes.

Not a lot is it. But after doing a little research I have found out that foxes are of the dog family, they are carnivorous and enjoy small rodents and bugs, perhaps a squirrel or rabbits and yes even a chicken if available. Now even though they are in the dog family, albeit the smallest in the species, they stalk their prey like a cat, slowly creeping up on it for the kill. But once moving they are fast, agile, and have keen sight, smell and hearing. Once mating they live as a couple in a 8 mile area that they defend vigorously from deep in the woods to right in someone's backyard, from desert to swamps. They are a small, versatile animal, that eats smaller creatures to live. They don't seem that bad. Unless you're a farmer who keeps losing small animals to those foxes.

Perhaps that is why foxes have a bad reputation in the Biblical historical understanding. Much of the world in Biblical times was agribusiness, some were landlords that rented out their lands that others would work, some Biblical people were nomads that traveled the lands, but most people would have had small farm, small flocks of animals, perhaps goats, sheep, a few chickens. And when farmers lost chickens to foxes, they were upset. Foxes were viewed as thieves, dirty, deceitful and evil. Not a good helpful animal at all.

Even the few times they come up in the Bible it is usually not under good circumstances. Remember the story of Samson. We don't really get that reading much in our lectionary cycle with the Sunday's readings, but many of you remember Samson from when you were kids learning in Sunday School. You see Samson had taken a wife from the Philistine people in Timnah (this is his first wife before he met Delilah). At the wedding party Samson taunted the philistine guests with a

wager. If they could answer his riddle he would give them thirty festival garments and thirty linen garments, but if they could not answer his riddle within the seven days of the wedding feast, then they owed him thirty festival garments and thirty linen garments. So the wagering went on and the riddle was told, but the people could not figure out the answer. So after three days they got worried and asked his wife to beg him to tell her so she could then in turn tell them – especially since she was one of them, and they threatened to burn her alive if she didn't do it. So she begged Samson and cried and begged for the answer, until he gave in and told her the answer. Upon hearing it she went and told the philistine guests and they told Samson. He was enraged at their deceitfulness and swept down on a nearby city killing thirty philistines and gave their garments to the wedding guests in payment and left back to his own people. His wife who everyone thought had been abandoned was given to the best man at the party for a wife. Only later right before the wheat harvest, Samson went down to be with his wife, and was surprised to find that she was now with his best man. Again Samson was thrown into a rage, he went out into the countryside and captured 300 foxes (here is where the foxes come into the story) he tied their tails end to end with torches burning right there in between their tails. To exact his revenge he took these 300 foxes with burning tail torches and let them loose in the wheat fields of the philistines – burning all their crops, and their vineyard and olive trees besides. You could imagine the destruction these fleeing three hundred foxes would have made scattering the fire all around. It destroyed the people's harvest, their means of support and livelihood if not risking their very lives. Not a really great memory of foxes or pretty picture of foxes in this story, of revenge, madness, and killing.

Years later, during the time of the Kings, after the Judges like Samson are long in the past, there is another Biblical image of a fox. In the Song of Solomon, the writer is waxing poetic about his fair one, his love, his beauty, his garden that is now in full blossom, He womanly charms and showing their fruit, she is lovely and beautiful. And then right in the midst of this poetic tale, the writer reminds the people to capture "the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards", that spoils the pure love. In modern terms girls must be careful out there because there are foxes lurching all about to ruin them. Again not an awfully nice image of a fox, since they are viewed her as the destroyers of the pure and decent.

So lets turn to the New Testament, perhaps there we have a better image of a fox. Jesus even calls someone a fox once. Do you remember in Luke's gospel when Jesus is working his way towards Jerusalem, some Pharisees come out to warn him to get away from there, because Herod is out to Kill him. And Jesus rebukes them saying, "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." Jesus doesn't use the word Fox to be polite, he means it in a derogatory way. This is the same Herod that

divorced his first wife so he could marry his sister in law, and then he lust after his step daughter/neice and promise her up to half his kingdom, which cost John the Baptist his head. Not a really nice guy. He was the very image of a fox, a liar, a thief, a scoundrel.

So that is the image of a fox in the biblical world of Jesus' day. Not something furry and lovable, but the worst of the worst, a villain of the worst kind. Now look again at our Gospel reading for tonight. Jesus says that even the foxes have holes but the son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. We are the sinners, we are the deceitful beings, fallen creatures, cheats and liars, that Jesus came to save. Each of us here as we examine our own sinful state know we are like those vile foxes, we have homes and places we belong, but Jesus comes giving all that up so that we could be saved. He gives up the heavenly throne, the righteousness of perfection, he humbles himself, making himself weak, so that we might have life. So that we can be washed clean of our scoundrelness, our villianious, our sinfulness. Jesus enters Peter's house and heals his mother in law, then all evening long Jesus heals everyone that is brought to him all those demon possessed, all those who are sick or diseased. He come so take our infirmities and bear our diseases. For we are the foxes and Christ becomes lower than that, giving up his very life so that we might have a home that is eternal. As we think of Jesus this Lenten season, let us remember went he gave up to save us, the worthless foxes and sinners of this world. Let us repent and turn back to God receiving that forgiveness and that eternal home. Amen.

May the peace and Grace of God be with you now and throughout this Lenten Season. Amen

Led by Christ in our journey of repentance and moved by his compassion, let us pray for the church, those in need, and all of God's creation.

Lord Almighty, we gather before you this evening as humble, weak, servants of your creation. We fall to our knees in prayer to turn to you, to repent of all our sins and wrongs that we have done and have left undone. Continue to lift us up, to make us new, washed of our sins, forgiven, and sent forth once again as your witnesses to your awesome grace and mercy. We give you thanks for this great gift of forgiveness and salvation through Jesus Christ your Son.

Lord in your mercy, Hear our prayer

Almighty Creator, you breathed into the dirt and dust of the ground and gave us life, you made us out of dust and to dust we shall return. We come before you now as people who know of our limited life, our weaknesses and our pains and sorrows. We turn to you for hope and strength, for the salvation that will break us out of this life and give us new everlasting homes in your heavenly kingdom. We come to your table this night and receive that forgiveness of sins, that blessing of the Holy Spirit and that gift of the promise of eternal salvation all won for us through the sacrifice of your own Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Lord in your mercy, Hear our prayer

Gracious Father, we pray for your Holy Church. As servants of Christ we are given a freedom through the forgiveness of sins, to serve you and all people as you would have us do. As people of St. Mark and St. Paul make us your witnesses to that glory, fully redeemed and forgiven, washed clean and made new we rise up to seek out those who still need to know of your glory. Call upon your congregations and your church universal with your spirit to fill us and send us so that we may reach out to those burdened with pain and sinfulness, to show them your blessings and forgiveness. Empower us Lord fully reliant on you and your grace to be your workers in our community and beyond.

Lord in your mercy, Hear our prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, there are many who kneel at your feet, and yet there are many more who need still to reach out to you and feel that presence of your mercy and love in their lives. There are many in need to feel that freedom from pain, from guilt, from sickness, from fear, from anxiety and worry. Grant your healing spirit to lift up the afflicted, to strength those facing adversity, to stand beside those who are alone, to give hope to those who are depressed. Be with all those that will be dealing with physical and mental anguish and grant them healing. With prayerful minds and heavy hearts we lift up all those needs and remember before you all those who are hospitalized, shut-ins, hurt and forgotten, and all those we mention now in our prayers to you.....

Into your hands, gracious God, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.