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“Taking the High Way”

A sermon by
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13th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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2 Kings 2: 1–2, 6–14, Psalm 84; Galatians 5: 1, 13–25; Luke 9: 51–62

I have learned a great deal about foxes lately,
due to a recent run-in with a mother fox and her pups
at Camp New Hope during last week’s Vacation Church School.

On Monday and Tuesday, we spotted a female fox slinking around the
periphery of camp, hiding under over-turned canoes,
slithering between parked cars.

She was beautiful, really; hardly bigger than a cat,
with a full, bushy tail, equal to her body length;
sleek and gray with touches of red and white
along her chest.

It seems that she had chosen to dig a burrow for her pups
right under the main office and pavilion where we headquarter
all of our bible school activities.

So the questions of the week, our “fox news flashes”, as we dubbed them,
quickly became these:

Who is going to have to move, the *vulpes vulpes* (scientific name) and her pups,
or we, the *homo sapiens*, and our children?

And, are we in any danger of her becoming aggressive towards us,
or is she and her family in any danger because of us?

And so I went on-line at night to gather as much information as possible
in order to make a decision for the best of all of us.

I learned that foxes are *crepuscular*, I love that word,
meaning that they tend to hunt at dawn and at dusk,
and they are *omnivores*, eating most anything, including small rodents, worms,
eggs, berries, fruit, and insects.

They have a very acute sense of hearing, and can actually detect small animals,
such as moles and voles, tunneling underground, and dig them out.

I learned that they are shy and sly, and tend to avoid all contact with people,
if possible, and that they are wily only in that they will do
anything to feed, nurture and protect their young.

Their pups are born in the spring, in burrows which they dig,
with at least two exits, so that there is always a way out.

And their litters can be from 2-12 pups, who stay in the burrow until
maturity, 8-10 months, at which time they disperse promptly
to hunt on their own.

On Wednesday, I sat in the pavilion at camp nonchalantly eating my lunch,
when I saw the mother fox slowly stalking from car to car,
and then at break-neck speed, making a bee-line in my direction.

I yanked my feet up on the picnic table, and made myself as small as possible,
afraid that the fox might be in her attack mode
as she sprinted towards us and disappeared under the deck.

But she was not focused upon those of us in the pavilion at all;
she was only interested in reuniting with her needy little family.

So, by Wednesday, our new way of being in the world as disciples of Jesus,
became the Way of revering ALL LIFE, as holy;

of honoring the pre-existent claims of the fox and her pups
upon their sacred ground;

and, subsequently, of moving the *homo sapiens* out of the way
of the *vulpes vulpes* family,

and to finding an alternative way for us to be Vacation Church School
at Camp New Hope.

The foxes became a teachable moment for us at camp, in discerning
what discipleship might mean for us when lifestyles collide.

And the Way which we discerned, became the way of revering all life,
which was not the easiest way,

seeing that there were 250 of us who chose to move

out of the way of a mother fox and her two pups.

But the Way of the cross is seldom the easiest way to be in this world.

Jesus uses foxes, and birds, too, as examples for teaching about discipleship,
in Luke's ninth chapter, which is something like a check-list
of do's and don'ts for new disciples.

He commissions and sends out the twelve with power and authority.

Do drive out demons, heal diseases, and preach the gospel, he says.

Do feed the hungry masses, and demonstrate the kingdom of God-
certainly no small tasks!

Do travel light along the way, he instructs them;

don't slow yourselves down with baggage, bread, money, or
extra clothes.

Do rely on the hospitality of complete strangers;

but **don't** you dare tolerate rudeness or lack of respect
from those you meet.

If they fail to welcome you, **do** brush the dust off your feet,

and **do** move your camp to another location.

Do know that Herod the Tetrarch is "that fox", as Jesus calls him,
a threatening presence,

capable of beheading those who prepare the Way of the Lord.

Do take up your cross daily and follow me, Jesus teaches,

to the top of the highest mountain, where divine favor is evident,

and even through the darkest valley, the deepest burrow,
where no second exit exist,
where no downy comfort lines your nest,
where you certainly will encounter resistance,
uncertainty, and a personal stretching and sacrifice
far beyond your circle of relationships and routine practices.
But **do not, do not** let on to anyone that *I am the Christ!*

And then he sets his face towards Jerusalem, our passage today say – twice.
The Hebraism “to set the face” means to demonstrate one’s purpose,
especially in the prospect of difficulty or danger.
We might say that Jesus “puts on his game face” or as my father used to say:
“When the going gets tough, let the tough get going”.

Because setting his face towards Jerusalem
means the beginning of the end for Jesus;
a 180 degree turning towards certain suffering,
towards total submission of his spirit into God’s hands,
and towards a trust and embrace of that new, unknown,
untested God-promise – *resurrection*.

And stepping out into the territory of the Samaritans, the enemy,
means stepping out into liminality, opposition, unwelcome,
discomfort, threat, and the challenge of everything
that the disciples have learned thus far.

The disciples immediately want to “call down fire” upon the disrespectful
and unwelcoming Samaritans, in the mode of Elijah,
who summoned the fire from heaven to prove
the sovereignty of Yahweh God over that of the heathen god, Baal.

But “the other”, the Samaritan people in this case,
is not the focus of Jesus’ teachable moment here.

The issue is not the laying waste of the other; not retribution; not revenge;

not the burning and consuming of everything which *they* hold dear;
the destruction of *their* way of life, their loves, their beliefs.
It's about the disciples "calling down of fire" upon themselves,
upon all that they, themselves, hold dear;
upon their own burrows and nests, their own family ties and heart strings,
upon their own home places and work places,
their own customs and beloved traditions, and letting go of them.
It's about making space for the sovereignty of God in their own lives.
The important issue for Jesus is the singular devotion of his disciples to the new
Way of being in the world through his own ministry.
When everything they have known and trusted has been stripped away;
when all of the comforts and constants of home and vocation and land
have been left behind, what will be The Way before them?
What will be their guiding principles? Who will lead them?
Who will walk with them?
Whom will they trust to show them The Way
to live and move and have their being?

I read a book recently which has captured my imagination on this very issue.
It's called, *The Road*, and it's a Pulitzer Prize winner by author Cormac McCarthy.
I didn't think I'd like it at first, because it's a novel about nuclear winter,
about the end of the civilized world when fire has been called down,
and has burned our planet to a crisp.
Color has been bleached away, leaving a desolation of dirty whites,
grays and black, except for occasional flashes of fire;
except for occasional splashes of blood.
Fire and firestorms have consumed forest and cities, and ashes and soot
mingle with snow and rain and fall from the sky.
But I became hooked, and as I read, I found myself humming
the Christmas hymn, *In the Bleak Midwinter*,

but which I now caressed as a relic and sang as I read,
"snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow".

In the book, a father in his late 40's and his son, about 10, both unnamed,
walk a desolate road.

They wander through the mountains, towards the sea, pushing a grocery cart
which contains a tarp, extra clothes, and remnants of food
which they scavenge along the way.

And yes, they have a gun, with a few bullets, because they share the road
with other survivors; marauding gangs of thugs who will go to
any length for a bite of food.

But the father has a mission, despite the fact that he has lost almost everything.
He tells his son: "My job is to take care of you.

I was appointed to do that by God."

McCarthy does not say when or how God enters this father's being, or his son's,
nor does he say how or why they are chosen to survive together
for 10 years, to be among the last living creatures on the road.

But they have survived, and God has broken into their desolation.

The father believes the world is finished and that he and his son are
"two hunted animals trembling like groundfoxes in their cover.

Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it."

But the father and son walk the road together, and the son has a mission, too.

He carries the torch that reveres all goodness and life, as only a child can do,
as only God-people can do.

The child becomes father of the man; and a little child leads him.

He looks up at his father and asks, "Are we still the good guys?"

"Yes. We're still the good guys," his father replies.

"And we will always be," the boy says.

"Yes. We will always be," the father answers. (p. 77)

And the son shows the father, over and over, what being the good guys means.

It means sharing food with the hungry. It means saying thank you.

It means never giving up. It means going the distance.

It means being compassion incarnate.

It means carrying the fire of love to the very end, even to the unloveable.

And in the end...

Shall I tell you what happens in the end, or will it ruin it for you?

Shall I tell you what happens when they walk the road all the way to the sea?

Shall I tell you what happens when it's no longer an option

to go and bury the dead;

when it's no longer a choice to get one's life back;

when the father sickens,

and we think the little boy will be left as sole survivor?

Here is a hint at the mystery of the Way at the end of *The Road*:

(The father) woke in the darkness, coughing softly. He lay listening. The boy sat by the fire wrapped in a blanket watching him. Drip of water. A fading light. Old dreams encroached upon the waking world. The dripping was in the cave. The light was a candle which the boy bore in a ringstick of beaten copper. The wax spattered on the stone. In that cold corridor they had reached the point of no return which was measured from the first solely by the light they carried with them.

"Do you remember that little boy, Pop?"

"Yes, I remember him."

"Do you think that he's all right, that little boy?"

"Oh yes. I think he's all right."

"Do you think he's was lost?"

"No. I don't think he was lost."

"I'm scared that he was lost."

"I think he's all right."

But who will find him if he's lost? Who will find the little boy?"

"Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again."

(p. 280-281)

Foxes have burrows. Birds have nest. Disciples have the Jesus, the Christ,
compassion incarnate, always with them, always in them,
always finding them, always holding them,
lighting the Way, and that's enough.

When everything else is lost, God finds us wherever we are.

And because of this grace, disciples of the Way of love, the Way of Christ,
are called to keep our hand to the plow
and carve a deep trench of goodness to the very end of the row,
and never look back. Amen.