

March 17 is always St. Patrick's Day on the secular calendar and on the church calendar. Unless it falls on a Sunday. Then it drops off the church calendar for the year. Sundays always take precedence over minor saints' days. Because of that, and because of my Irish heritage, I want to at least mention a couple things about Patrick, because they tie in to what I want to talk about today.

One of the remarkable things about Patrick is not only his success as a missionary, but his choice to be a missionary in the first place. As a teenager, Patrick, an English youth, was captured by pirates and sold into slavery in Ireland. In Ireland, Patrick spent 6 years as a slave tending animals.

One night, Patrick heard a voice say, "Your ship is ready."¹ Even though he was 200 miles inland he journeyed down to the coast and was able to board a ship that was just leaving.

But after escaping Ireland, he wanted to go back as a missionary. Patrick studied for the priesthood and was eventually ordained as a missionary bishop. He returned to Ireland and labored diligently the rest of his life, facing opposition from druid priests and local warlords. He established churches and baptized thousands. St. Patrick is regarded as one of the most successful missionaries in history, finding Ireland a pagan island, and leaving it Christian.

There are amazing reversals in Patrick's life, the escaped slave later returning to the land of his captivity. The missionary who defied the power of entrenched local leaders and ended up overthrowing their power structures.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus is defying and denying the importance of another local leader: King Herod was the ruler of Galilee, Jesus' homeland.

Some Pharisees come up to Jesus and warn him that Herod is out to get him, that Herod wants to kill him.

Jesus replies, "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.'"² What's Jesus saying? What does he mean when he calls Herod a fox?

In Jesus' culture, there's nothing complimentary about being called a fox. In Jesus' time, fox is a strong insult. The lion is the king of the beasts. In Jewish thought, a fox is the opposite of a lion. A fox is a little wimpy animal that thinks it's important but really isn't. The Jews had a saying: 'It is better to be a tail among the lions than a head among the foxes.' It is better to be the last-place lion than the first-place fox.

When Jesus calls Herod a fox, what he's saying is that Herod may think that he's a big powerful king. But in reality, Jesus is saying that Herod is really a little, wimpy, cream-puff, weaselly, insignificant, weak, impotent peon who's just pretending to be king. Jesus is giving Herod the verbal equivalent of a slap in the face. It's derogatory language of the highest order.

¹ *Confession of St. Patrick* 17

² Lk 13:32

"Herod wants to kill you."

'Oh yeah?' Jesus is saying, 'Well tell that fox, tell that pip-squeak that I've still got work to do. I've got to heal the sick. I've got to fight the forces of evil. I'll do it until my work is accomplished. I'll do it today and tomorrow, and on the third day I'll have done what I've been sent here to do.'

Jesus is referring ahead to what awaits him in Jerusalem, the work that he will do upon the cross. And on the third day it will all be completed in the resurrection.

Jesus is telling Herod, 'You have no power over me. You're just an insignificant bully. I'm doing God's work. And I won't let any minor earthly king distract me or dissuade me from serving the king of heaven.'

This Lent we're reading through the Gospel of Luke as a parish. And this theme of earthly power versus heavenly power has already appeared several times in our readings to date.

Luke is not unaware of who held earthly power during the time of Jesus. We heard in chapter 2 that Jesus was born during time of Caesar Augustus, when Quirinius was Governor of Syria.³ We heard in chapter 3 that Jesus was baptized and began his ministry in fifteenth year of the reign of Caesar Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and King Herod was ruler of Galilee, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.⁴

We also heard about another power. In chapter 4 the devil comes to tempt Jesus, and at one point he shows Jesus all the kingdoms of this world. He says to Jesus, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."⁵

So Luke is very clear who hold power from an earthly standpoint. And yet, one of the key themes throughout the Gospel of Luke is that things are not necessarily like they seem. In fact, God has a different view of what true power is.

Now, the idea that God's standards are different from human standards appears throughout scripture, including all the Gospels. But in Luke, it is a core organizing principal. It is one of Luke's main themes that he emphasizes over and over again to make sure we get it.

It is one of the core themes in Luke that God wants to turn things upside down so that we see things his way instead of the way we would normally see them. This theme is sometimes called the "great reversal" in Luke.

Take Jesus' birth. Jesus is not born in a palace in the capital of the Empire, the city of Rome. Jesus is not even born in Jerusalem, the center of Judaism. Jesus is born in Bethlehem. Jesus grows up in Nazareth. Jesus lives in a backwater of the Roman Empire. Jesus lives in the 1st century equivalent of what 21st century folks might classify as "flyover country."

³ Lk 2:1-2

⁴ Lk 3:1-3

⁵ Lk 4:5-7

Now, by the end of Luke, Jesus will have taken his message and his ministry to Jerusalem. And by the end of Acts, Paul will take the good news of Jesus all the way to Rome.

But most of Jesus' work takes place in the hinterland, in Galilee, at the fringes of the Roman Empire. By human standards, what Jesus is doing must be unimportant. If Jesus were really a mover and a shaker, he wouldn't be languishing in obscurity in a backwater area like Galilee.

But Luke reminds us over and over again that things are not what they seem. Luke reminds us that the conclusions our human minds jump to are not equivalent to the way God thinks of things.

In chapter 1, the Archangel Gabriel appears to the old priest Zechariah in the Temple, announcing that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son, John the Baptist. You would think the old priest would know how God operates. But Zechariah demands a sign of Gabriel. And the angel basically says, 'Shut up. That's your sign. You won't be able to speak until after the child is born.'⁶

And yet, 6 months later, this same angel will appear to Mary, a distant relative of Zechariah. Mary is a young girl. You would expect her to be naïve. And yet she responds with faith. She says, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true."⁷

By human standards, the old priest should know more about God than the young teenage girl. And yet, the girl responds with faith.

And a few verses later, Mary will sing a song of praise to God. We later gave it the title of "The Magnificat." As part of that song, Mary will talk about how God's ways are different from ours. As she is praising God for what he is doing, she sings about the way God reverses things:

She sings, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed."⁸

And a few verses later she sings about more of God's reversals:
"He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."⁹

In other words, God is not showing his favor through Caesar. God is blessing the world through a baby in the womb of a young lower middle-class girl on the fringes of Caesar's empire.

⁶ Lk 1:20

⁷ Lk 1:38

⁸ Lk 1:46-49

⁹ Lk 1:51-53

Caesar's army may think they control that empire. But on the night of the child's birth, another army, an army of God's angels appears. And they don't appear to the Roman senate. They don't appear to the priests of the Temple in Jerusalem. They appear to a group on the bottom rung of society, a group of lowly shepherds keeping watch over their flocks outside of Bethlehem.

And the angelic army paradoxically proclaims peace—"Peace earth among those whom God favors."¹⁰

40 days later, Mary and Joseph will take that baby to the Temple. And there an old man Simeon will recognize him as God's anointed, as God's messiah. And Simeon will praise God, saying,

"My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."¹¹

God's salvation is not made known through an emperor nor a conquering general. God's salvation comes through this seemingly helpless baby.

And as we read this week, 30 years later that baby will be grown up. And he will begin his ministry. He will stand up in the synagogue in his hometown. And he will use the words of Isaiah to describe his ministry:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."¹²

God's power, God's mission will be made known in this great reversal. The oppressed will go free, the blind will see.

So, later on in Luke by the time we get to our Gospel lesson for today, when Jesus is warned that King Herod is out to get him, Jesus calls him what he is. A fox. A petty tyrant. Nothing more really than a school yard bully.

And Jesus knows what his mission is.

"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.'¹³

Jesus is showing God's favor by healing those who need it. Jesus is showing God's true values by opposing demonic powers. Jesus is winning his victory by embracing his cross. Jesus is triumphing by dying, and by rising on the third day.

¹⁰ Lk 2:14

¹¹ Lk 2:30-32

¹² Lk 4:18-19

¹³ Lk 13:32

It's God's great reversal.

We need not fear the foxes anymore.

We only need to heed our savior's voice and trust his incalculable love.

By his wounds, we are healed.

By his death, we gain everlasting life.