

Some Pharisees warn that Herod wants to kill Jesus, just as Herod killed John the Baptist. Only Luke records this story. Why the Pharisees warn Jesus is not clear, since until this point in the story they have rejected Jesus as a prophet. Furthermore, all we have been told is that Herod desired to see Jesus.

Jesus refers to Herod as a fox and to himself as a mother hen. Jesus knows the odds. Herod was brutal, but when Jesus says, “Go tell that fox for me . . .” Jesus is insulting Herod, making fun of him.

The metaphor of the fox has a double significance: it suggests that Herod resorted to a ruse to trap Jesus and, secondly, that Herod’s power was negligible. Often contrasted in antiquity with the lion, the fox did not measure up.

The one who was to scorn Jesus at his trial, who would “regard him as having no significance,” was in fact an insignificant being who counted on eliminating his enemy by a ruse but who was not to succeed in doing so. While a mother hen would fear a fox, Jesus was not cowed by Herod.

Faith means coming to terms with vulnerability and ambivalence. Every act of faith will be pursued by a fox. If the desire for security and certainty overwhelm us, fear inflates the fox into a ravenous lion making it harder to act in accord with our better angels.

In Luke, Jesus understands himself as a prophet and he knows he is going to share in the fate of the prophets. This knowledge does not deter him from pursuing his work: “Tell Herod *I must* be on my way.” For Jesus, whatever fear Herod inspires is overwhelmed by a deep and abiding trust in the One who called him to the prophet’s work.

As Jesus suffers the fate of the prophets, this trust is sorely tested. A cry of abandonment is uttered from the deep and terrifying darkness of the cross, echoes in the tomb, and remains unanswered for three days.

As one theologian put it, the terrifying power of darkness is inseparable from the redemptive power of the sacred. The deeper we are drawn into the creative depths of darkness the more real the actual presence of the sacred becomes (Altizer).

A dark dread overwhelms Abram as he falls into a deep slumber. The word translated “deep slumber” is the same Hebrew word used for Adam’s sleep when God fashions Eve. The demand on Abram and Sarai to get outside and count the stars is a command to emerge from their present enclosure which has grown deathly sterile into a new condition in which a fertile self-realization becomes possible.

If we allow fear of the fox to direct our lives, we will try to survive with the least possible pain and discomfort and with indifference to everything else. However, an internal longing for harmony and happiness lies deeper within us than ordinary fear or the desire to escape misery or physical destruction.

This longing lies beneath all the terrors that afflict us; it arises out of our deep, complex and inexplicable caring for each other, for our life together. It calls us to work for the healing of the world, for the cause of justice, trusting that our work is not in vain, trusting that our work will be sustained, nurtured and fulfilled in the creative depths of the mystery we name “God.”

A good many of Rembrandt’s paintings were initially painted by apprentices in his workshop, Rembrandt then applying the finishing touches. Sometimes what a gifted apprentice handed over to the master was already so much like a Rembrandt that little remained for the master to do.

On other occasions, though the preliminary painting came from the hand of the same gifted apprentice, and was again very close to being a Rembrandt, it nonetheless fell short in such a way that the master had to do a lot of repainting in order to bring it up to his standards.

On other occasions, the apprentice was so incompetent that Rembrandt had to do a major repainting to make it a Rembrandt; on a few occasions, though the apprentice was again very incompetent, he nonetheless somehow produced a painting that required only a bit of tweaking by the master to bring it up to Rembrandt’s standards.

Observing this, some apprentices asked Rembrandt about the point of their work. Why are we undergoing all this training and producing all these paintings if our best productions sometimes require a lot of reworking by you and our worst, sometimes none at all?

Rembrandt would have none of this. Do your best to paint a Rembrandt, he insisted. I’ve been at this a long time; trust me. I would much rather have you try your best than have you slack off. What you do is important for my work. Trust me, it is.

We are apprentices of the master prophet, called, according to our ability, to paint the walls of life with light. Faith translated into muscle and invisible bone is the fundamental revolt against Herod and his ilk. It is a Ukrainian woman, a mother hen, offering sunflower seeds to an armed Russian soldier so that Ukraine’s national flower will bloom once the aggressor has perished in the soil.

In the face of a thousand reasons to fear for the future, in the face of the sure and certain knowledge of sharing in the fate of the prophets, in the face of all the foxes who want us to believe they are lions, we are called to trust in the promise of the One who, in a deep and terrifying darkness draws us into the creative depths of the sacred, who takes the work of our hands and makes of it a work of art.