

I've started reading *The Patriot* by Alexei Navalny. As you may know, Navalny was a Russian dissident who fought for justice and civil rights, waged an anti-corruption crusade, fought for free and fair elections in Russia, and opposed President Vladimir Putin's autocracy and oppression.

As we know, the rich and powerful are not happy when someone speaks truth to them. So it came as no surprise that Navalny endured all manner of persecution, imprisonings, and threats to his life, including a chemical attack to his face, nerve agent poisoning that left him in a coma for two weeks, and ultimately slow poisoning that killed him in an Arctic penal colony. He laid himself on the line for human dignity and freedom. He spoke truth to power, and it cost him everything.

It's a story as old as the Biblical story, where prophets who spoke truth to power were killed and persecuted, and in our story in Luke this morning, we see Jesus  
decidedly on the way to Jerusalem,  
Where he knows there is hostility to him and his kingdom message of love.  
He's not playing it safe. He won't back down.  
Instead, he's on his way to face his foes.

I've told you this before, but he doesn't do what my youngest son suggested to me when he was probably a kindergartener and we sang the song "Shine, Jesus Shine." He leaned over to me and said that he thought the song should really be titled "Run, Jesus Run," so Jesus could get away from the cross!

No, Jesus doesn't run. Even when some kind-hearted Pharisees warn Jesus not to go to Jerusalem, he stays his course.

(And notice here: not all Pharisees are opposed to Jesus, an important lesson about not judging groups of people based on the actions of some.)

Not only does Jesus remain resolute, he doubles down and says to the Pharisees:  
"Look, you go and tell that fox Herod I'm going to keep doing  
the kingdom work of

caring, curing, and healing  
until that work is complete.”

It’s a bold declaration to an insecure, petulant, murderous, autocratic dictator.

The translation of fox here can be deceptive for our modern ears. I kinda like foxes. They are sly and cunning but generally they seem like smart creatures. Maybe it was watching the Disney movie “The Fox and the Hound” with my boys one too many times.

However, “fox” would probably be better translated as “jackal,” which has none of the positive vibes of “fox.” Jackals were mangy scavengers who foraged for food in the town dumps. So, Jesus is using a pretty pejorative term.

Then, see what happens next. It’s really remarkable. A fantastic feat of emotional maturity and intelligence.

Jesus is sparing with the jackal Herod, aware that his continued ministry and presence in Jerusalem means that he will lose his life,  
and yet, he doesn’t get agitated, he isn’t fearful, he isn’t making excuses.

*He is . . . empathetic.*

*He is filled with compassion.*

*Compassion for the city that will kill him.*

“Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, I’ve longed to gather you to me as a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings.”

This is a remarkable and amazingly powerful image. It shows both Jesus’  
resolve to protect, **and**  
the awareness of the danger.

Among the troubling developments in our world today is the outright *disdain* for the concept of empathy from fellow Christians.

We know there is lots in our world that is troubling and downright antithetical to the gospel. Here is a new one I learned about recently: the re-interpretation of *empathy* as something that is *contrary to the will of God!* Various high-profile right-wing Christians are seeing empathy as a big

part of what is wrong with the world today. Just to name two books, *Toxic Empathy*, and *The Sin of Empathy*.

New Testament scholar Pete Enns has a good take on this demonization of “empathy”:

My concern here is that a VITAL concept of the Christian tradition is being tarred and feathered in an effort to support the truly idiotic anti-woke Jesus agenda, which is, if you allow the expression, complete horse [manure]. sh\*t.

Empathy that spurs compassionate self-sacrificial action is not new with Jesus. The roots of it go back to our (weird!) OT reading from Genesis this morning.

God promised many descendants to Abram. But this hasn't happened yet. So Abram, (his name has not yet been changed to Abraham) asks God for children, or at least a sign.

And God gives him a sign but needless to say, cutting animals and birds in half is a beguiling sign, to say the least.

However, knowing a bit about the customs of the time can help us understand this supernatural and eerie event.

In Ancient Near East culture, an agreement or contract between two nations or two parties would always involve a stronger party and a weaker party.

Of course, the stronger party didn't need anything from the weaker party; they could do as they pleased.

The weaker party was at the mercy of the stronger party, so if the stronger party offered some agreement, the weaker party would most often accept it because it would offer some protection or benefit.

The ritual that would finalize the agreement would be for the weaker party to walk between the cut-up pieces of the animals and birds, signifying that if the weaker party didn't keep up their end of the deal, they would suffer the same fate as the animals that were cut in half. (Something of this practice survives today in our language of contracts, such as describing making an agreement as “cutting a deal” or “cut a contract.”)

Since the stronger party doesn't have to give up anything – because they are the stronger party – you can see how remarkable the scene is here in Genesis. God, clearly the stronger party, symbolically walks between the pieces in the form of a smoking

fire pot and a torch. In this way, *God pledges God's own demise* should God break the contract. This is the remarkable love and faithfulness of God to Abram, and through Abram to all humanity.

Back to Luke.

When Jesus says that he will go to Jerusalem no matter what, it is in keeping with the pledge God made to Abram to give God's own life for the sake of the Covenant, for the sake of humanity.

Our scene features a fox, a hen, and a brood of little chicks. Is a hen any match for a fox? Not really. But the hen isn't just there to shelter her chicks from the rain; she is there to fight to the death to protect her weak and vulnerable brood.

Do you think there is a connection to the events in our world today. . . ?

It's been another week, hasn't it? Stock market plunged, veterans' jobs were cut, social security is being threatened, and the leader of the free world felt sorry for the richest man in the world and his stock losses, so he turned the front lawn of the White House into a car dealership. That's not a sentence I ever thought I'd say, but here we are!

The Economic Uncertainty Index is as high as it was during COVID, and according to Thomas Friedman, it is an "uncertainty that comes from seeing a world that you knew for 80 years being unraveled by the most powerful player."

David Brooks adds this description our situation:

"If there's one through line in this administration so far, it's the amassing of power. And if there's another through line, it's the destruction of anything that might restrain power, . . ." <sup>1</sup>

BUT, even as God calls on us to shelter the weak and vulnerable, to stand in self-sacrificial ways in an increasingly dangerous world,  
we have a God has empathy and compassion *for us*,  
who offers shelter from the storm,

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<sup>1</sup>"He fired in the military, he fired the judge advocate generals in the agencies. He fired the inspectors general. He goes off on the media because we're a potential restraint on his power. Really, so far, it's just the amassing of power and the destruction of anything that would restrain power." - David Brooks.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/06/opinion/david-brooks-trump-power.html>

and shelter under God's wings  
from the "foxes" who would devour and destroy us.

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Even though he was imprisoned and eventually killed, Alexei Navalny's movement inspired a new generation of Russians to fight for democracy. His supporters still push for his vision of a free Russia, even in the face of state repression. His words ring true today, I think,

. . life works in such a way that social progress and a better future can only be achieved if a certain number of people are willing to pay the price for their right to have their own beliefs. The more of them there are, the less everyone has to pay. And the day will come when speaking the truth and advocating for justice will be commonplace and not at all dangerous in Russia." - Alexei Navalny

Navalny laid his life on the line, just as  
Jesus outfoxed the fox, by laying his life on the line  
and protecting the weak and the vulnerable.

May we do the same.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.