

## **Hens and Foxes, Zaida and Michael**

(Based on *Disarmed* by Marshall King, Herald Press 2021)

Luke 13:31-35, Philippians 3:17-4:1 by Patty Friesen (Lent 2 March 13/22)

On this second Sunday of Lent, Jesus is on a collision course with King Herod. When John the Baptist spoke against Herod, Herod imprisoned him (3:18-20). We learn of John's fate from Herod himself: "John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?" (9:9). Ominously, Herod wants to see Jesus (9:9). In response, Jesus asserts that he has nothing to fear from Herod (cf. 23:6-12, 15).

Jesus characterizes Herod as "that fox" (13:32), a metaphor that paints Herod as sly, cunning, and voraciously destructive. But Herod will not hinder Jesus from completing his work. Jesus casts out demons and heals the sick—public acts that demonstrate the power of the kingdom of God. Jesus does not travel to Jerusalem in order to escape death from Herod but in order to die there. Both Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and his death there will be controlled by his faithfulness to God's redemptive purposes, not by King Herod.

In today's scripture, two animal images symbolize opposing forces. On the one side lurks Herod, the fox. The Bible consistently depicts evil as dangerous and predatory. The danger to the community of God's people is real and present with foxes about. On the other side, Jesus likens his desire for Jerusalem, as God's emissary, to that of a mother hen who instinctively draws her young under her wing when danger threatens. How often has she wanted to gather her young to herself? What more tender image could describe God's love? (New Interpreter's Commentary) This hen-like feminine non-violent humility outfoxes the cunning powerful Herod. The fox does not win this encounter. While Herod thinks he is in control in killing Jesus, Jesus

raises again in his own life and in the lives of all courageous disciples who have also died for their faith and convictions.

This is the story of two young Jesus-like heroes named Zaida Catalan from Sweden and Michael Sharp from Goshen, Indiana who worked for the United Nations Peacekeeping Mission and were killed in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2017 but whose lives and international witness have outfoxed the greed and violence of Congolese warlords who killed them.

From a young age in Sweden, Zaida Catalan wanted to change the world. She consumed books the way some children consume candy. She asked her mother, what kind of job could she have as an adult to change the world? She knew she wanted to study law to end injustice in the world.” Zaida’s father Mario had been arrested by the Pinochet regime in the 1970s Chile. He escaped to Romania and then to Sweden where he met Maria, Zaida’s mother so their family knew first-hand about foxes. Zaida headed to law school at Stockholm University and became a legal advisor to the Green Party’s office at the Parliament of Sweden. She helped work on issues of gender equality and helped craft policy. She went to Guatemala to help train young people on democracy and gender equality.

Michael Sharp was born to John and Michele Sharp who were Mennonite pastors and Mission Board workers in Elkhart, Indiana. But as Michael said, he wasn’t a good Mennonite boy! Michael was an average student who didn’t like school. He liked to gamble, weighing risk and reward and pocketing money that paid for his college education. He struggled with depression. He had several romantic relationships that didn’t last. But he had a keen mind and strong Anabaptist Christian convictions, including wanting to work for peace and make a difference in the world. After graduating from Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg,

Virginia, he went to Heidelberg, Germany with Mennonite Mission Board to work with US soldiers applying for conscientious objection and dismissal from the military.

After 9-11 and the military call up to Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, numerous US soldiers were questioning whether this was a just invasion and whether this was the best solution to the conflicts in the Middle East. They would call Michael and other Mennonite Mission Board workers for help in conscientious objection to the wars. Michael was articulate and 90% of the applications for conscientious objection he worked on were successful. Some of the soldiers he worked with served jail time for refusing to join their units. He joked that he worked with soldiers during the day and took their money on the gambling table at night.

In 2008, at age 28, Zaida Catalan ran for Parliament. She wanted to make laws, not just for Sweden but for the entire European Union. She wanted to fight for the climate and green jobs. She wanted to end the sex trade industry across Europe. After losing the election, she extracted herself from politics because politics became too slow for her as a way to enact change. She was looking for ways to get out in the world and do real hands on work. In 2010 she went to the Congo as an expert on gender equality and sexual violence and human rights; training male and female police officers. She traveled to Afghanistan and Palestine and in 2016 returned to Congo.

In her “Dancing with Myself” essay, Zaida wrote, “When I set foot at the International Airport of Kinshasa, I was sweating profusely. I was alone in one of the most lawless countries in the world and I had no idea of what I was getting myself into. But I knew I was in the right place. The heavy humid air, mixed with red earth and diesel fumes and chlorophyll, I knew I had arrived in a place where the heart resides.” The Congo had captured her heart. She

continued, “Despite the pain, despite the violence, the Congolese fight for justice and better lives and they dance. They dance to smile and to shake off the devil’s grip.”

Meanwhile Michael Sharp got his master’s degree in Germany and returned to Indiana for awhile. Restless for international challenges, he joined Mennonite Central Committee’s work in eastern Congo to work with refugees and armed rebels. In a brutal history of colonial and cyclical violence, MCC wanted someone who could teach non-violent peacemaking and distribute Canadian Foodgrains Bank resources in the United Nations Displaced Persons camps.

The first thing Michael did in Congo was buy a motorcycle. He didn’t want to ride in Jeeps like other white people but wanted to ride like local Congolese. He ate fufu and conversed in French. He insisted in forgoing the comforts of home and that humility impressed the Congolese and earned their respect. He wasn’t like the other white people the Congolese had known. He listened very well and wanted to know the truth of what was going on in eastern Congo. He modelled the life of Christ and some of the Congolese Mennonite groups saw their numbers grow because of their relief work. They practiced the words of Menno Simons in the actions of true evangelical faith; feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and visiting prisoners.

In an MCC publication, Michael put his work into context: Places of intense conflict are also places where creative solutions are born and put to the test. If Jesus’ example is for everyone everywhere, what does that look like in eastern Congo, where war has been the norm for 20 years? I get to work on the frontlines of Congolese ingenuity and faithfulness in response to violence and hardship. (Disarmed, p. 110)

One time Michael and his Congolese partner Serge came across some bandits robbing passengers on a bus. Michael started talking to the bandits in French. He asked them what they were doing, “How can you do this to people in your own country?” He asked. The bandits fled

into the bush. Michael and Serge stayed until the passengers reboarded the bus and were on their way down the road again.

Michael didn't have to be in the Congo, much less put himself in danger on behalf of the Congolese. Yet as he encountered a violent situation, he stopped, walked up and engaged in conversation. He challenged men holding guns to rethink what they were doing. He couldn't fix all the problems and prevent all the violence. Yet in this situation, he could do something and he did.

Zaida Catalan came to Congo under humanitarian convictions following a long Swedish tradition of going into the world to help others. Michael came to Congo under Anabaptist Christian convictions. They both ended up on the United Nations Security Council investigating war crimes and bringing warlords to justice. As a result of their work, powerful politicians and their armed supporters were sent to prison by the collaborative work of police, doctors and investigators. But it was dangerous work and while they tried to check out situations before going into interviews with warlords, they were lied to about their safety in a meeting with foxes and were kidnapped and shot in the forest on March 12, 2017. After their deaths, UN investigators and the FBI asked their families what justice they wanted. The Sharps said they didn't want retributive justice, a life for a life. They wanted the killers named and held accountable and suggested the perpetrators be sentenced to twenty years of walking through the forest unarmed to serve internally displaced people by carrying water and digging latrines!

The foxes have never been identified and are believed to have been sponsored by the highest levels of the Congolese government. But Zaida and Michael's legacy for peace live on in art works in the US and in Sweden. Both of them were given the Dag Hammarskjold Medal. UN Secretary General Hammarskjold died in September 1961 when his plane crashed

mysteriously as he was visiting the Congo to negotiate a ceasefire. The medal is given to those who have lost their lives as a result of UN peacekeeping work. Michael's parents continue to speak publicly about their son. In the summer of 2019, they spoke via video to the Mennonite Youth Convention in Cincinnati and told Mennonite youth to do things that are significant enough that they would be willing to risk their lives.

Zaida and Michael were raised to be hens and non-violently protective of others in a world of foxes. Foxes still roam the earth these days. May they be transformed by God and gathered as chicks under God's wing. Amen.