

“Jesus, the Mother Hen”

Luke 13:31-35

Second Sunday in Lent

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Christ the King Lutheran Church

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I'm sure this will shock no one to learn that I know practically nothing about raising chickens. Practically nothing at all. Yes, my family has recently become foster care providers for dogs. Sarah and I had two cats, when we lived in Vermont. We even delved very briefly into raising goats during the year we both lived in Tanzania. But never chickens. I know next to nothing about raising chickens, about chicken behavior or the like. A number of my friends have recently gotten involved in raising hens, primarily for the fresh eggs. And as it turns out, most of these hen-raising friends of mine live not on farms or even in the country, but in fairly urban centers like Saint Paul and New Haven, Connecticut. I understand there have been some neighborly disputes here in New Brighton about raising chickens—whether hens belong in backyards deep in the burbs, and how they may or may not have an effect on property values.

Still, I don't think you need to know that much about raising hens or about chicken behavior in general, really, to understand the image of the mother hen. The mother hen, who protects her babies, her chicks, by drawing them under the protection of her wings. Who provides warmth, rest, and comfort along with security by folding her wings around her young and keeping them safely there. You don't need to be an expert in animal husbandry to get this image. You don't need to know anything at all, really, about raising chickens to get why this image might provide comfort to folks.

In fact, in many ways, it is yet another variation on an image from the animal kingdom that we as human beings can relate to. Just as we understand the notion of the mama bear —who will put up a fight with anyone, anything that comes between her and her cubs. Just as we get the notion of a mama bird, who is known both for feeding her birds directly from her mouths in the earliest stages of life, and then for pushing her young out of the nest at the appropriate and opportune time, insisting that they fly and be free. So it's not a stretch to think of this mother hen image as being pretty recognizable for us today. There's even a notion of a Mother Hen syndrome in our current parlance, the idea that the healthy, balanced, admirable tendency to protect or comfort or shield from danger also has its less healthy counterpart, when the caregiver crosses the line to be over-protective, smothering, co-dependent, taking on another's problems as their own, not allowing the chick, the child, the one being cared for to respond or react for themselves. That's the shadow side of the Mother Hen, we might say.

The whole notion of Jesus acting as a mother hen comes in the context of his deliberate movement toward Jerusalem, toward his calling, his purpose, his destiny. As we walk through this season of Lent, we retrace Jesus's way—the way of suffering, the way of death, the way of the cross—that he takes on freely and intentionally. It all begins with his baptism, when he is identified by the voice of God coming from heaven, saying “This is my beloved Son, with whom I'm well pleased.”

He emerges from the waters of his baptism, and then heads directly into the desert to be tempted by the devil, as we read in our gospel lesson last week. Having endured all the devil's testing, he continued teaching and preaching, until he arrived again on the holy mountain of God, transformed and transfigures before his three closest disciples, affirmed once again by God's voice speaking to him, "this is my beloved son, listen to him!" And as he heads back down the mountain, he turns his face toward Jerusalem, toward the city that is famous for rejecting and even killing the prophets sent by God to save it. The way he chooses is the way toward Jerusalem, the place where prophets go to die, as some have said.

So, as it is becoming clearer and clearer that this is the way Jesus has chosen, that this is the way he is now following, that this is the way he is showing his disciples, too, it is now that folks try to warn him of what is ahead—as if perhaps he did not know. "Be careful, Jesus," say the Pharisees, a crowd we're not used to caring that much for Jesus' safety and well-being. "Be on your guard, Jesus. King Herod wants to kill you. He wants to kill you like he killed John the Baptist before you," they warn. But Jesus laughs them off. "You tell that fox I'm not scared of him," Jesus replies. "You tell that sly fox Herod that he cannot harm me until my work is done. Besides," Jesus says, "it is impossible for him to kill me, impossible for a prophet like me to die anywhere else but Jerusalem." He's not worried about that fox Herod, since his time has not yet come. He needs to make it all the way to Jerusalem before he dies. He may be worried about other predators, about other foxes out there, but not about this one, not now. He knows the way that he must walk, the way he must continue.

But just then, as much as he says he not worried about Herod the Fox, he becomes distraught about the people of Jerusalem themselves. As much as he knows his destiny—to preach, to teach, to heal, to cast out demons, and finally to die a death worthy of a prophet in Jerusalem—still he is overcome with emotion for this city that kills the prophets like him. How many times I've wanted to take you under my wing, he says, like a mother hen caring for her young. But you would not let me. You would not receive the protection, the comfort I offered, he cries. And suddenly, our animal metaphor expands. Suddenly, we have both the fox and the hen. The fox who wants to kill Jesus, and Jesus himself the mother hen, whose instinct it is to protect the people of Jerusalem under his wing. Jesus has chosen the way that leads to Jerusalem, the way that leads to betrayal and suffering and death. In so doing, he would like to also like to choose to protect his followers, to shield them from that fox Herod, as well as from the other foxes out there. He laments that the people are refusing his care, his comfort, his protection.

It's a few years back now but how many of you remember the film "the Blind Side" with Sandra Bullock? It's based on the true story of Michael Oher, a homeless teen with a natural talent for football—specifically for protecting the passer and others in the backfield—who is taken under the wings of a mother and a family who help him to develop and grow in other ways as well, going on to play football first at Ole Miss and eventually for the Baltimore Ravens and other NFL teams. There is a scene in

the middle of the movie, where Big Mike, as he's called, and the family's young son are in a car accident—a head-on collision that seemingly comes out of nowhere. On impact, the airbags inflate, which likely saves their lives. Still, the paramedic is confused, since SJ, the son, is small enough that he ought to have been more hurt from the impact of the airbag itself. Finally, it dawns on them all, when they notice that Big Mike has a broken arm, that at the exact moment of impact, just before the airbag fully deploys, he has instinctively put his arm out to protect SJ, and has in fact borne the brunt of the force from the airbag. As the story unfolds, we learn that Michael has an extraordinarily heightened sense of protection for those he loves. His instinct, his impulse at any sign of danger is to protect those he cares for.

[black] That instinct, that impulse toward protecting the ones they love, that is the impulse Jesus is demonstrating when he refers to himself as a mother hen. As he continues on his way, with his face set toward Jerusalem, he longs to offer this protection, this security some more. As much as he brushes off the threat that might be coming from that Fox, king Herod at least as it concerns his health and well-being, Jesus longs to offer protection this this and any other foxes who might get into the hen house. In fact, what Jesus is clearly demonstrating is that on this way that he has chosen, he is not at all concerned about own protection, but is deeply concerned about protecting those he loves.

Friends, this way that Jesus has chosen, this is the way we also are inviting him to show to us. As we journey together in this season of lent, we call out to Christ to show us the way—to show us the way that provides care and comfort, safety and protection to others, placing their needs ahead of our own. We invite Christ to show us the way to and through the Jersusalems we face in our life—those threats and temptations that are within us and all around us. We are called to offer protection to those who are most vulnerable among us—to intentionally seek out ways that we, like Jesus, can gather other under our wings, offering our protection, just as he has offered such security to all of us.

This is the impulse that led the Senegalese Scouts to form a symbolic ring of protection the pastors of the Lutheran Church of Senegal as we processed several blocks from the church headquarters to the celebration hall for the service of ordination back in 2009—a procession that was repeated earlier today as they ordained six new pastors for the church there. This is the instinct that was active during the Arab Spring protests in Tariq Square in Cairo, as Egyptians Christians formed a protective circle around their Muslim neighbors one Friday afternoon, so that they could pray in peace, a favor that was returned two days later as Egyptian Muslims formed a protective circle around Christians as they worshiped. This is the same impulse that allows us to stand up for people who are vulnerable in our society, providing advocacy, allies, and aid to refugees or single moms or homeless veterans or LGBT teens so that they can find safety, security, protection and comfort that we ourselves have known.

All of this requires sacrifice—a word we don't use lightly, but one we should not be afraid to consider, especially during this Lenten season.

Because here is one thing I do know about chickens; here's one thing I have figured out about these mother hen behaviors without necessarily observing it much first hand, let alone being an expert. When a fox does get in the hen house, when a very real threat comes that close to home, a mother hen's instinct is to gather her chicks under the safety of her wings. And in that scenario, there is indeed warmth and comfort, safety and security for those chicks. But in that same scenario, the Mother Hen herself is not much of a match for a sly fox.

Confronted with the foxes like Herod and Pilate, Jesus chose the way of self-sacrifice, while at the same time offering protection to those he loved, those he came to save. Jesus calls us to join him on this same path, to share in his sacrifice, to offer our protection to others. And we cry: Christ, show us the way. Amen.