

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
Sunday March 17, 2019 Lent 2C  
Text: Luke 13: 31-35  
Preacher: Christopher McLaren  
Title: The Good News of Mother Hen

Jesus is warned by some of his friends among the Pharisees, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you!" Herod had beheaded Jesus' cousin John the Baptist, but upon hearing reports about Jesus, that he was John resurrected he was perplexed and curious and wanting to meet Jesus. But now, Herod's curiosity has clearly turned into something else. Herod was not angry because he thought Jesus had misinterpreted a bible story. Herod was murderously angry because Jesus, like the prophets, criticized the manner in which people in power exercised their power thereby failed to do God's justice. Jesus did what the church is called to do, shine the light upon the darkness of those in power.

Remember, Jesus is tried and killed by the Roman establishment at the urging of the Temple power structure so we can never really justify the notion that Jesus was not engaged in a political struggle during his ministry. For politics is really about how we treat people, how we care for and resource a whole society, shaping a world in which families and individuals can thrive and grow, where gifts and skills can be turned into meaningful work, and where the needs of the most vulnerable are not forgotten but met in compassionate ways. So, our spiritual lives, just as Jesus' spiritual life, naturally connect to the political realities around us each day. This past week while I was away with my family, some 800 Honduran refugees came through Albuquerque. I'm told that many churches and other organizations rallied to offer housing, food and essentials to these vulnerable people. The love of Jesus is seen in such service.

In response, engages in what can only be called inflammatory political speech. Jesus calls Herod a fox, a dangerous insult, meaning that Herod was both clever and destructive. Evidently Jesus was not above talking a little smack to the local political elites.

But there is something else in Jesus' speech as well that is tender and full of longing. Jesus at great risk to himself has brought the kingdom of God near to Jerusalem but he is full of grief over the rejection of his message.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Luke 13

This is a lament over Jerusalem that Jesus gives voice to here. He sees with deadly clarity the rejection of his message of the kingdom of God by his own contemporaries and by those who say that they are indeed looking for something new from God. Oh, Jerusalem why won't you listen, why can't you open your eyes and see that your path is one of destruction, O Jerusalem you've wandered away from God's ways. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem return to the Lord your God, don't give in to the ways of the empire, rebuild your communities, resist the exploitation of the poor, take care of the vulnerable, teach your children what is really important, don't lose sight of God's compassion and mercy, don't be duped by this powerful culture validated by violence and bent on vast inequities. No, no, no Jesus says wake up, don't kill the prophets, listen to them!

One wonders what Jesus' lament over the United States might sound like or what ours as his followers might include? O Washington, Washington, when will you care for the health of everyone within your land? O Washington, Washington when will you welcome the stranger and the immigrant? O Washington, Washington when will you put the common good above the greed of a few? O Washington, Washington when will you begin to confront the violence that infects our nation's heart?

For Jesus there is a deep identification with the wisdom of God in this impassioned lament Jesus likens himself to a mother hen sheltering her chicks from danger by covering them with her wings. It is a beautiful parental image and powerfully feminine. It's a lovely maternal image and I think many of us find in it a kind of comfort. But if you are depending on this image as one of protection it's a bit deficient. When the foxes or the world come prowling around the chicken coop a mother hen with just her small beak and fluffed out feathers is not exactly what we would desire as a solid defense strategy.

The problem with this passage and our defining story is that Jesus doesn't really resolve this issue in the ways that we find satisfactory. Jesus desired with all of his heart to protect those in his care but when the foxes of Herod and the Romans showed up, he would not become a fox himself to defend them. Jesus didn't call together a rebel army or even try to escape or defend himself. No, he simply did what any mother hen would do, he fluffed up his feathers, hid the chicks underneath his wings and put his body lovingly between the fox and his own beloved.

In general, it really didn't seem like a fair fight. The power of empire was pitted against the mother love of the hen for her chicks. And from the outset it was simply an almost entirely anonymous contest that seemed to go very badly for the mother hen. But from another perspective it was a kind of cosmic battle of two kingdoms; the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God. God put his money on the mother hen in this fight and it looked like all was lost. The chicks scattered while the mother hen was given a death sentence by the foxes and their wheels of justice.

It's a strange story and depending upon whom you listen to, she won. However, it's a victory that always takes a bit of explaining and Christians have been telling this

story for a long time as an alternative to all the stories of foxes getting their way. In truth things seemed to go rather badly for the mother hen, there were feathers all over the place and blood and stillness. The hen had refused to become a fox to defend her young. She simply could not become one of them to resist them. Of course, this meant that the mother hen died at the hand of the foxes. But something surprising happened, the mother hen who had died, placing herself in harm's way, returned with the scars on her body to show them her love. Her return demonstrated in a way nothing else could that the power of the foxes was not enough to overcome her love for her own. There was in the mothering love of the hen a power stronger than the foxes, stronger than death itself. Following her example her chicks might have to endure what she did to get past the foxes of this world, but no matter what happened she would always been waiting for them on the other side with a love stronger than death. The power of God's love is something that no fox really understands until they come up against it.

The Church itself is often referred to as Mother Church and I wonder if it might not be helpful to think of the church as the mother hen in this parable of Jesus. As Barbara Brown Taylor said, "More and more I am convinced that we miss something vital to our faith when we insist on approaching God one by one. Our individual relationships with God are very important, but they do not make us the body of Christ." It is our life together that makes us Christ's body, that mysterious organism that is much more than a collection of individuals.

When we come together to worship each week, we are creating something here in this place that has its own life and reputation in this neighborhood and city. We call what we are making here the church and it is so much more than a building because it is really a people who together become part of something ancient yet new. It is a difficult thing to identify ourselves with the church at times because not only do we get credit for the good things the church has done in the past, but we also get the blame for things done long ago or even recently in the name of the church. And, if we are honest, there are a lot of churches out there that we would rather not be associated with if possible. The point of all of this however, is that we as part of the church, the body of Christ. We are more than just a loose collection of individuals. We have an identity and a calling as a community that is meant to animate our life here together. We stand for something beautiful. We live out a strange and powerful story in the midst of empire. And it pays to remember our life-giving story often.

This odd passage about foxes and chickens is an opportunity to remember what it means to be the Body of Christ. When we hear the lament over Jerusalem that Jesus cries over God's city, we can ask ourselves if we are like Christ, do we share his sadness over a world that seems to have gone mad, or have we become so enamored by the culture of death around us that we can no longer distinguish ourselves from it?

I wonder what kind of a church, what kind of a people of God we will find ourselves being here at St. Mark's as we grow and change? It's an interesting image to think of

the church as a mother hen, fluffed up and protecting the most vulnerable from the advances of the foxes of our world. If Christ was willing to put himself between his own beloved people and the foxes of his time, are we as the Body of Christ willing to put ourselves between the foxes of this world and vulnerable chicks, the disadvantaged, the single parents, the elderly, the poor, the hungry, the children of our state who lack the opportunities to thrive? Are we a church that is willing to say something to the foxes of this world on behalf of the chicks that need protecting? It really is a hard question that we shall have to struggle with. Will we be true to the one whom we proclaim that we follow, refusing to run from the foxes and refusing to become one of them along the way?

Oh, I know the church is no perfect institution. How can it be since it is full of people like you and me? I know that it may seem like I'm expecting too much out of organized religion or even disorganized religion for that matter. But at the same time the church is a wonderful mystery, and each of us is a part of it. "Mother Church" some call her, a mother hen where we come to have our souls and spirits fed and nurtured in worship, our imaginations rekindled by sacred story, our lives stirred by fellowship and conversation, our hearts encouraged by song and liturgy, our loneliness eased by community. The church is a place where we grow, where we grow into people of faith willing to put our bodies between the chicks we've come to love and the foxes of this world. How do we grow into the Body of Christ, into mother hens like Jesus? We do it by giving what we have received to those who need it, by learning to tell the stories of our faith alongside our own stories, and by loving and struggling to love as we know that we are loved by the one who long ago lamented over Jerusalem and gave his life to gather us under his wings and still does today.

*I wish to acknowledge my deep debt to Barbara Brown Taylor whose sermon Foxes and Chickens formed the firm foundation and inspiration for this sermon. I have borrowed heavily from her work and have learned much about this strange and powerful passage.*