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Lesson: Luke 13:31-35

When you think about God, are there mental images that come to mind? For many people, we don't know exactly how we "picture" God. So don't feel bad if an image does not readily come to mind. Some of the go-to images that many people use are an old man on a throne, or a euphoric dance of light. Maybe you thought of the flame that often depicts the Holy Spirit, or even a dove, or possibly a first-century Jewish man surrounded by 12 disciples. But, let's be honest: never has anyone used a hen as their go-to image of God. So when Jesus compares himself to a hen in our gospel passage today, it seems more than a little odd. A hen seems horribly insufficient; it comes across as an underwhelming metaphor. It also seems a bit country. Too plain. Too simple. Using a hen as an image for God could make some people cry fowl.

A hen; it's an odd metaphor, to say the least. I searched online for examples of any church that proudly claimed this narrative and placed a hen as permanent fixture in its worship space. I thought I might find a stained glass window, or a wood carving or stone engraving. As you think through the catalogue of churches you've ever entered, it is unlikely that you've ever seen a mother hen on permanent display. I wasn't able to think of any that I had ever seen. But I did the Google search, and all that I could find was one example. And when I found it, I realized that I had actually seen this permanent image of a hen in person. The hen and her brood under her wings are depicted in a tile mosaic on the front face of an altar. This is in a church that now stands on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. How fitting.

Jesus cries out in our lesson today, "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!” I get that this church on the Mount of Olives is the perfect location to connect to the metaphor of Jesus being the hen who protects her brood. But the sticking point is still that a hen seems so small and ordinary. Hens are useful -- I’ll give them that -- but they are neither very threatening nor are they very smart. Why did Jesus -- in his frustration over Jerusalem -- not go with a better animal metaphor? Perhaps because, when we get down to it, there might not be a better animal metaphor.

Yes, a hen is not considered very threatening, powerful, or even agile. Hens might not embody the characteristics that humanity typically strives to have, but there is one characteristic that hens embody perhaps better than any other animal: hens are extremely maternal. Hens will not hesitate when it comes to protecting their offspring. A hen makes sure that all her chicks are fed. In bad weather, a hen will direct her chicks to shelter, and if shelter is not to be found, she will spread her wings to become their shelter from the storm. If a hen picks up on a hint of danger, the mother hen will call out to the chicks and -- obeying her call -- they will come to her protection. Perhaps foremost of all, if a fox or another predator is in their midst, the mother hen is known to draw that threat away from the chicks, even at the expense of sacrificing herself in order for her chicks to survive. It is that kind of maternal love and protection that Jesus desires to offer.

At the beginning of our gospel lesson, Jesus calls King Herod a fox. Some Pharisees had approached Jesus to warn him about a threat. “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you,” they tell Jesus. All that Jesus had to do was stay out of Jerusalem. He could avoid the fox entirely. But, instead, Jesus went there. Why? Because, like a mother hen, Jesus would not put his own safety and welfare before ours. Like a mother hen, Jesus went to that fox knowing that the cost of it would be his own life.

Jesus went, knowing the slaughter that would occur by facing down that fox, and he went knowing that it would allow you and I to live.

However, King Herod is just a symbol of the greater threat. If Jesus had avoided Jerusalem, we would have been vulnerable to a world filled with foxes. Foxes can be anything that seek to tear us apart and destroy us. Sometimes these foxes can be powerful and corrupt rulers like King Herod. Sometimes these foxes are traumas within us that attack our true selves. But we should not be blind to the fact that these foxes often come to us in the form of ideas and worldviews that are based on hatred or fear: racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, misogyny, transphobia, harassment, xenophobia, bullying, white supremacy, and -- sadly -- the list goes on.

These are evils. These are evils in our midst that defy God's will. These are evils that seek to spread distrust, suspicion, and fear. These are evils that if not confronted can fester into outcomes of senseless killings. And, as we learn more about the terrorist attack against worshiping Muslims in New Zealand, the more we know that the perpetrator was hoping to inspire others. These ideas and worldviews do not become evil once they killed someone. They are evil long before then, as those words attempt to tear us apart. When those ideas begin to dehumanize the other. When those worldviews set us against one another. These are metaphorical foxes that seek to destroy. Worldviews based on fear and hate begin to destroy long before anyone is killed: they cause damage to others, destruction to households and communities, and they even destroy the ones who are carrying that hate and fear. Whether these metaphorical foxes take the form of hateful worldviews, or the form of corrupt rulers like King Herod, or the form of struggles and anxieties that we carry within ourselves, they seek to destroy us and they stand opposed to God's will.

Often has Jesus desired to be the hen who gathers her brood under her wings. His desire is to offer protection; to enter the fight himself, to ensure our safety by being the one who is killed by the fox. He does this out of love. He does this out of a sense of maternal protection. Dying on the cross is somehow mysteriously the protection we need. A hen diverting the evil of the fox away from the chicks, so that the chicks may not be destroyed by the evil, and so that the resurrected hen may destroy the power of that evil. The sacrificed hen is always there to feed, to shelter, and to protect her chicks. It doesn't matter how much wandering off the chicks have done; those sheltering wings will always be open for the chicks to come home to in any storm. That maternal instinct will not waver, even if we chicks have a tendency to not listen. There is nothing we can do to stop Jesus from loving us this much. There is nothing we can do that will cause Jesus to remove his protection from us.

That is the good news. It is not glamorous. It is not an image that showcases God's strength and might. It is simply an image of a hen who unconditionally loves her chicks so much that she will gladly offer herself over to the clutches of a fox in order to guarantee the protection of her chicks. That is not a glamorous image of God's might. However, we may be hard pressed to find a better metaphor to describe Christ's dedication and faithfulness to us. Allow that to fill your hearts. Allow this example of God's faithfulness toward you to take root in your life. Allow your Lenten walk to be shaped by Christ's full dedication to preventing the foxes and the storms of this world from having the final word. Allow your daily journey to be shaped by the trust that Jesus is with us through thick and thin. Know that the sheltering wings of Jesus are always open to you. You are always invited to find your protection -- and your salvation -- in him. That is the plain and simple good news. Thanks be to God. Amen.