

This morning, we have a most picturesque and poignant Gospel text before us. There's a poignancy to this text, because it includes Jesus' lament over Jerusalem, one of the relatively few times in the Gospels that we meet up with Jesus in deep sorrow. Yet it is also a picturesque text, in that Jesus is using colorful images of animals and birds; he describes King Herod as a fox; he describes himself as a Mother Hen. Foxes and hens within the same paragraph---is that a good combination? We all know what happens when a fox gets into the hen house, right? Sounds like a dangerous situation here for Jesus, and indeed, it was. Let's look into this a bit further.

When it comes to chickens, I know them best from my experience with them at a dinner table. Fried chicken, chicken salad, chicken nuggets---I'm familiar with chicken in these forms, but I have never kept chickens. Some of you have undoubtedly raised chickens and know *much* more about them than I. The other way I know about chickens is from stories. Chickens show up in folk tales around the world. Remember The Little Red Hen, who taught her chicks the importance of working in the preparation of a meal if they wanted to share in eating it? Remember Henny Penny, the chicken who was easily panicked into believing and proclaiming that the sky was falling? Foxes also feature in our lesson, and I mostly know foxes from the occasional sighting in the wild, but they show up in stories too, especially in some of Aesop's fables. While foxes are generally portrayed in folk stories as being sly and smart, chickens tend to be portrayed as being easily flustered and not all that bright; hard workers perhaps, but not likely to become the head honcho. Our expressions about chickens are also not that positive: "You're chicken!" we criticize those who are lacking in courage. And maybe you've said, "I'm running around like a chicken with my head cut off today."? We think of chickens as being scatter-brained.

Now, given all of this, why does Christ choose to portray himself as being like a mother hen in this lesson? I can see why he'd describe Herod as a fox; Herod *was* a sly, devious schemer of a man. Rightly or wrongly, we associate those qualities with foxes. But, why would Christ describe Himself as a mother hen? Couldn't Jesus come up with a more majestic bird to personify Himself than a *chicken*? An eagle, maybe? We

know that in Psalm 91, God is described as raising us up on eagle's wings.....wouldn't an eagle have been more appropriate in this context, too? In fact, this passage is the *only* place in Scripture where God is pictured as a chicken. But these are Christ's *own* words, Christ's own choice of an image for Himself as the Incarnate God, and that bears closer scrutiny.

The setting for these words is Christ's sorrow over Jerusalem's on-going resistance to God and to the prophets of God. "How often," Jesus mourns, "I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing." Jesus paints for us a picture of God as a mother hen gathering chicks beneath her wings. And I am told by those who know chickens far better than I do, that hens *are* fiercely protective of their chicks. They may *not* be the brightest or fastest birds around, but they are passionately devoted to their chicks' welfare. They gather them, protect them, and nurture them. Evidently *this* is the quality of God to which Jesus refers here. God, in Christ, wants to gather people together, to protect and nurture them. But people are not willing, they resist being gathered and nurtured. God wants to help us grow up a bit more before our next flight outside the nest. God is fierce in devotion to us, passionately committed to keep gathering us together no matter how many times we wander astray or scatter. We are here this morning as part of this community of faith *because* God gathers us. We forget that—we think we're here because it's a habit or we like the service or our friends are here or whatever. But all that's just on the surface level. On a deeper level, we are here gathered because God, like a hen, is determined to bring us together. A turn of phrase we might keep in mind for this text is this: *God* gathers, *evil* scatters. You know how easily we scatter, whether from church, family, friends, marriage, faith itself—we easily become scattered, which does not glorify God, but likely pleases Satan. *Evil* may want to scatter us, but *God*, like a mother hen, wants to gather us. God gathers, evil scatters.

And let's take a moment to acknowledge that *there is* evil in this world; there is a fox in the henhouse, to continue with the imagery of our Scripture lesson. There is so much that divides us and scatters us. Foxes, when they seek to have a meal of chicks, often take an indirect approach; they fluster and harry the hen so that the chicks scatter in all directions, and then the fox picks off the chick that appears the most vulnerable and

alone. That's telling, isn't it? When we are scattered, isolated, panicked and on our own, we are much more vulnerable to evil; to becoming fearful, doubtful, angry, isolationist in our attitudes. We are much easier pickings for the evil in this world, when we leave the strength of the flock and the protection of the Mother Hen. That's one of the dangers of abandoning faith and Christian fellowship.

I'd have to admit I love this picture of Christ. The thought of being gathered beneath the wings of God is inviting and comforting to me. And although the mother hen image isn't used elsewhere in Scripture, there *are* numerous Scriptural references to being sheltered or protected by God; of being offered safe haven. Such verses are especially encouraging when we feel ourselves to be in perilous circumstances. And peril happens. *Jesus* is in peril in our Gospel lesson. Ironically, his ministry of forgiveness and mercy is bringing out the worst in those with power, including King Herod and the Roman occupation force in Palestine. Many sought to take his life, and eventually they succeed. Our lesson today begins with a sense of danger. For in this lesson from Luke we see Jesus has a choice to make—to play it safe or to place himself in harm's way. He is entering Jerusalem, and that's a perilous thing for him to do. Jesus' life is in direct danger, because Jesus has made a name for himself among the people, and the powers-that-be were not happy with that. Although the Pharisees are often opponents of Jesus, they nevertheless warn him of this threat to his life in the opening verse of our text. "Get away from here," they say, "for Herod wants to kill you.". They may have had an ulterior motive, actually, since they wanted Jesus to just go away and be quiet. Or maybe they *did* value the life of this fellow teacher, even if they disagreed with him on some points. For whatever reason, they advise Jesus of the threat on his life and tell him to go and hide. Jesus does not heed their advice, merely responding by calling Herod a fox and stating that he will continue to perform exorcisms and healings. He goes on to lament over Jerusalem, a city with a long history of rejecting and killing the prophets sent by God. True to the heart of God, Christ seems to speak here not out of *anger*, but rather deep *anguish*; he doesn't call down hellfire on Jerusalem, he rather grieves how the people continually reject God. Just like a good parent is sometimes more *grieved* than angered by their children's rejection; or apparently just as a mother hen will continually keep trying to gather those chicks under her wings. There is a longing and pathos in this lament of Christ. The reality that Christ *does*

lament, teaches us something about the value of honest lament before God. Christ is not too strong or proud to weep over Jerusalem, over the state of the world around him. If that's true, then isn't it also true that we may very legitimately weep and lament over the world around us, likewise? Many feel deeply grieved right now over the state of our nation and the world. Even a cursory glance at social media reveals a plentitude of people who are deeply distressed and disturbed by what they see. Lamenting is a valid response in such circumstances. Often our lament can help focus our feelings and guide us towards some kind of positive action. We may find guidance from God in the midst of our honest lament, as God receives our grief with the open arms of a God who longs, like a Mother Hen, to gather us and provide safe haven for us.

Why does God *long* to gather us, to provide safety? God does this out of a deep and profound love for us. God recognizes that sometimes we just need to be sheltered; reassured; held in God's arms or beneath God's wings until we're rested and strengthened and ready for the next foray. Sometimes we need to be guarded from evil and nestled beneath those wings.

I'm reminded of those signs we sometimes see designating something as a safe harbor or a safe haven. We have "safe harbors" along the Lake Shore so that boats may seek shelter in storms. We also have "safe harbor" designations for places where sexual trafficking victims may seek help. There are "safe havens" in some states where unwanted babies may be left, no questions asked, to be cared for. And in some states, "safe havens" are places designated for the homeless. Whenever I see any of these signs, I feel warmed; grateful and glad that as a society we seek to live out the love of God in such a way that the most vulnerable are sheltered. And sometimes *we* are the ones who need that sheltering. The idea of being gathered beneath the wings of Christ as Mother Hen sounds awfully nurturing and strengthening, and sometimes that's we need before we can face whatever's next.

Jesus knew this need; we read often of how he would go by himself or with just a few close friends at the beginning of the day to pray quietly and recharge; one version of gathering beneath God's wings. Worship, at its best, can offer us some of this kind of time with God, where we can simply nest and be gathered and know that we are loved and protected. Wonderful author Anne Lammott has written these wise words: "Almost

everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes, including you.” This seems to hold true with all kinds of technology, and it holds true for humans, also. That unplugging can be the time we spend within those wings of the Mother Hen.

One of my favorite hymns is Thy Holy Wings, which we will sing during Holy Communion. It includes the words, “Thy Holy wings, O Savior, spread gently over me. And let me rest securely through good or ill in Thee. O be my strength and portion, my rock and hiding place, and let my every moment be lived within thy grace.” I think the words capture our longing to be gathered beneath the wings of Jesus. And God longs to do just that gathering. Be gathered this morning at the table of the Lord. Be gathered in hearing the Word and singing sacred songs. Be gathered in coffee time, visiting with one another. Be gathered throughout the week, whether through connections with friends and family, or through connection with our Lord—be that through praying, hiking, serving, resting. Know what it means to trust in God’s sheltering care. Be gathered, rather than scattered. Amen.