

Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, February 21, 2016
Text: Luke 13:31-35

The Fox and the Hen



First United
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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There are over one hundred names for God in our biblical tradition . . . creator, king, master, maker, lord, shield, defender, ancient of days, mighty fortress, bulwark, rock, fountain, shelter, light, judge, root, shepherd, our help in ages past. Oh yes, and father.

But let us remember what we sang last Sunday, “Then to thy need God as a mother doth speed, spreading the wings of grace o’er thee.” God as mother, as Sophia, which is a feminine personification of wisdom, caretaker, nurturer, nursing mother. Referring to God as “she” is not a contemporary sensitivity to inclusion; it is right there from the start.

And if we follow our Trinitarian understanding of God in three persons, then every metaphor for Jesus and the Holy Spirit can be added to the list . . . savior, Christ, brother, chosen seed of Israel’s race, my way, my truth, my life, my feast, my strength, my joy, my love, my heart, man of sorrows, dayspring, daystar, sun of righteousness, root of Jesse, key of David, lamb, king of glory. And then, fire, dove, wind, the morning dew, breath, and the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love.

We get the point from the biblical writers and all of the poets and hymn writers since, there is no one image of God that says it all. And this is not just a contemporary reading of ancient texts. When we go back through the centuries we discover the rich imagination of the faithful who see God in a multitude of forms. Here is a prayer from 13th Century Germany that is included in our hymnal (#104):

O burning Mountain, O chosen Sun,
O perfect Moon, O fathomless Well,
O unattainable Height, O Clearness beyond measure,
O Wisdom without end, O Mercy without limit,
O strength beyond resistance, O Crown beyond all majesty:
The humblest thing you created sings your praise. Amen.

So, for today: Jesus, the Son of God, God in human form, the second person of the Holy Trinity, laments over Jerusalem, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” God personified, i.e. Jesus, imagining himself as a mother hen.

For those of us who did not grow up on a farm, we might think of Jesus as a mother hen to be an endearing, nurturing, genteel role. In our minds hens are dutifully laying eggs in the hen house for us to eat. We might think of dropping by the White Hen Pantry on the way home from work to pick up some milk. We might even fashion ourselves to be members of the flock of fans for the Toledo Mud Hens of minor league baseball. But, as a dear friend and esteemed clergy colleague has corrected my image, “Hens are not chicken.”

Jason Reed, now a retired minister living in Naperville, grew up on a farm in Canada. As a young boy it was his job every afternoon to go to the hen house and retrieve the eggs. The hens were free range, but most of them laid their eggs in two-foot square boxes attached to the inner walls of the structure. “If a hen was sitting on the eggs in one of the boxes,” Jason writes, “it was difficult to remove her. If you reached for the eggs, the hens would peck at you, and their beaks would bruise you and sometimes draw blood. It took courage and head and hand fakes to get them off the nest.” The hens were ferocious in protecting their eggs; hens are not chicken.

We begin to understand that Jesus portraying himself as a mother hen is not striking a placid, domestic pose.

Jason writes on, “When spring came, we always had half a dozen hens who would ‘set themselves.’ That is, they would go off and make a nest for their eggs around the edges of the farmstead in tall grass or in a fence row. The incubation period is 21 days. For all that time they would not return to the safety of the hen house at night. They were easy prey for coyotes, skunks, and weasels.” Jason and his mother would try to coax them back to safety, but the hens wanted their chicks to be hatched in the precarious freedom of the open range.

And again, we think of Jesus, the mother hen, wanting his chicks, the people of Jerusalem, to discover their freedom, and he puts himself at risk, for there is a fox out to get him. That is the other animal in our brief passage for today, the fox. A few weeks ago I sat in our well-insulated porch looking out at the iced-over lake where we live, and I saw a fox trot across the snow-covered surface. It was beautiful, the red fox with a luxuriously full tail prancing along the newly fallen white snow. As long as we had no hens in the yard (and we do not) and as long as I knew that our cat was inside the house (which she always is), I valued the glimpse of real life in the wild. At night I could hear the fox howl, and then a few nights later there was silence. Either he was on to another setting or, after all, it was fox-hunting season.

But there is nothing beautiful about the fox in Luke’s gospel. It is King Herod, the ravenous villain who feasts upon all of his enemies, and here comes Jesus toward Jerusalem. “Stay away!” the Pharisees tell Jesus. Here is one of the few times in the Christian text that the Pharisees come off as good and decent people, though if we are honest, we admit that the gospel writers, along with Paul and Peter, had a skewed vision of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the keepers of the faith, the conservers of the tradition, those who lived a good and honorable life according to the laws handed down for centuries, and the ones who went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. They were fine, upstanding citizens, leaders in the community, you know, like we are.

The Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod is out to kill him, and Jesus responds, “Go and tell that fox, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will finish my work.’” Clearly, Luke sees this timeline as a foreshadowing of the crucifixion that is inevitable. Why inevitable? Because Jesus will not back down even in the face of a murderous threat. Here is this mother hen hatching her chicks out in the open range, ready to protect them from any fox or skunk or weasel that comes along. Right . . . hens are not chicken, neither is Jesus, neither are we. When we see what is just and right and true and merciful and loving, we are compelled by our faith to do it, no matter what foxes skulk about.

People of faith cannot be afraid, sings the psalmist in Psalm 27. “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” That has been the bizarre headline of the past week, hasn’t it, people who embed themselves in the Christian faith conspiring to build walls instead of bridges, locking themselves away behind the walls of the hen house out of fear instead of venturing out into the real world with courage to live with others.

Now, watch what Jesus says next, now that we have the fox lurking and the mother hen risking her life to protect her brood. He sees the people of Jerusalem as his chicks who refuse to stay gathered together. “How often have I desired to gather (you) together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you are not willing!” Jason writes, “Six or seven baby chicks (out in the open range) require fixed-wing helicopter mothering. Chicks are stupid.” (And then he adds, “That is not a good sermon title.”)

He says, “The hen must multitask – cluck her distinctive voice to keep the chicks near, herd them with her wings, scratch vigorously to unearth seeds and insects for the chicks to eat. Without the hen, the chicks are lost.” Jesus tries to gather the lost and vulnerable ones together, and they will not listen to his distinctive voice, his voice of freedom, his voice of mutual caring, his voice of gathering together in order to stand up to the threat of the fox.

Jesus wants to gather the people of the city . . . there is more joy in being gathered together, there is more strength in being gathered together, there is more wisdom in being gathered together, there is more fulfillment in being gathered together. That does not mean that there are no foxes roaming about, that there is no danger, that there is no evil. Ironically, the courage of Jesus will put the evil of the world on center stage, and the people of Jerusalem soon will gather not to hear his words of love but to watch the power of hate drain his body of life. It is not the gathering for which Jesus calls, but it will turn out not to be the spectacle the people of Jerusalem will have anticipated. They will go home after the crucifixion and beat their breasts in grief for having squandered the joy they could have had, gathering under Jesus’ wings rather than at the foot of his cross.

Now, here is the power of the metaphor of Jesus, God in human form, as the mother hen: the hen is willing to die for her chicks. Jason testifies to the reality of the showdown between the hen and the fox. When the predator confronts the hen, she “puffs up her feathers, gets the chicks behind her, spreads her wings, and stares down the attacker. The predator will have to kill her first to get to her chicks.”

Sometimes the predator, seeing the puffed up hen with her chicks gathered behind her, will back off and go away. At other times, Jason says, there will be nothing left but blood-soaked feathers. As it is written, “This is my blood shed for you.”

Following Jesus does not protect us from real life, real pain, real loss, real evil. It does not take us away from “all of this.” Following Jesus is a way of finding courage in the midst of “all of this” by gathering together under his word, his action, his selflessness. He gives his life like the hen does for her chicks, not as a quid-pro-quo blood transaction of paying back for some indebtedness, but as a means for us to have life and to have it abundantly. And that abundance is exemplified by our gathering together and finding the courage to live life unafraid. Yes, there are foxes out there, but that does not drive us to cower in the hen house.

So, when we gather on Wednesday evenings during Lent to have conversations about racial issues in Madison, it is a means of establishing a “common table” at which we can talk with one another, and more than that, listen to one another. How divine it would be to have a place to be honest in community.

And when we gather to extend hospitality to thousands of Latino neighbors from around the state, as we did on Thursday, who came to Madison to tell the legislators that they are passing laws which codify meanspiritedness and racism, that hospitality is a means of gathering on behalf of the common good.

When we gather throughout the week, and most demonstrably on Wednesday mornings, to care for those in need, both with food and clothing for the body and nourishment and warmth for the soul, it is a means of facing the evils of our society and telling the foxes that they will have to go through us to get to the vulnerable.

And when we gather to protect homeless children and their parents, open our doors to music and the arts, walk the labyrinth in the chapel together, study the biblical texts with each other, pray for one another throughout the week, enfold into the church community children and youths . . . and when we gather for worship, right here and right now, we are doing it as an expression of our faith in a God who cares, in a Savior who lives in our midst, and in a Spirit that

emboldens us to tell and live the truth. We gather within the embrace of Jesus because we are stronger, braver, and of more use together than when we live scattered in a thousand directions.

Barbara Brown Taylor, a wonderful preacher who always has a pungent way of expressing things, says that Jesus could have presented himself as the mighty eagle of Exodus, or the stealthy leopard of Hosea, or the proud lion of Judah. Instead, he portrays himself as a hen in a showdown with a fox. “That way,” she says, “the options become very clear: you can live by licking your chops or you can die protecting your chicks.” (“As a Hen Gathers Her Chicks”)

Nothing sentimental here; it is realistic. Our strength comes not from hiding behind the walls of the hen house, but by being the offspring of the one who gathers us together that we might live life fully. A hen is not chicken; neither are her chicks. Amen.