

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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Mother Hen

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This Lent we are reading Jesus' teachings from the Gospel of Luke as he makes his way towards the cross. These stories prompt us to think deeply of our own humanity in this time and place. Over these six weeks, Jesus teaches us that no matter where we are, God is with us. We belong to God.

Today, the lectionary reading asks us to think about those places we consider our strongholds. "Stronghold," an ambiguous word to point to any place we seek shelter when fear stalks us.

To offer some context, the Gospel of Luke tells us that after the mountain top experience Jesus "set his face towards Jerusalem," determined to fulfill his mission.

Along the way, a bystander asks, "will only a few be saved?" expecting him to say an exclusive and limited number of people will be judged worthy.

Instead, Jesus' reply concludes with an oft recited phrase "people will come from east and west and north and south to sit at table." He welcomes an infinite number of people from the ends of the earth. Then he continues on his way.

Before I read Jesus' next encounter, please pray with me.

Dear God, when our world seems to threaten us, secure us. Send your spirit to these ancient words and swirl among us that we hear Jesus as clearly as if we were there. May we always seek shelter in him. Amen.

Luke 13:31-35

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you."

Jesus said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.

Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'

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!

See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Both of my parents were raised on farms in the Midwest. My dad's eyes still get misty as he describes feeling "the Lord's presence" on the hills of Iowa. He loves farming but made his career in sales.

When they were transferred to central California for his job, they settled in a lovely rural community that carved out small farms. Their neighbor to their south was a beekeeper. To the north, they kept long-horn cattle. My parents tended an orchard, along with several acres of garden and pasture.

One Easter, I was out in the barn with my dad. He moaned, “oh honey, I want chickens and your mother won’t let me.” He showed me where he’d build a chicken coop – just between the sheep pen and the pasture for the cattle. An hour later, I was in the kitchen with my mom. Unprompted, she starts, “oh honey, now your father wants chickens.”

They had the livestock, a herding dog, barn cats, were always chasing after the gophers, and hosted a gorgeous variety of birds, including an owl. With the animal menagerie, what are a few chickens? We loaded in the truck, went into the farm-home supply. Since it was Easter, they had a wide variety of chicks.

The salesclerk asked, “brown or white?” I thought he meant the chickens, he meant brown or white eggs. After a few deliberations, we left with eight tiny chicks.

Once home, we fashioned an incubator from what was on hand, but unfortunately not a secure one. That afternoon, we counted three fewer chicks and blamed it on one of the cats.

On my next visit, the chicken coop stood exactly as planned and those little chicks had grown into the laying hens my dad

wanted. On the next visit, we again went to the farm-home supply for more chicks. This time, rather than put them into the wash tub, he placed them under a broody hen.

My mom named this broody hen, Ida Mae. When a hen turns broody, she loses feathers so when she brings the chicks closer, under her breast, she warms them, and they grow.¹ She accepted these chicks as her own. We didn't need an incubator. And she seemed quite content.

I learned the hard way not to get between Ida Mae and her chicks. Fierce. Protective. And the chicks knew she was their stronghold.

When the Pharisees confront Jesus with Herod's plan to murder him, he throws off the threat, and refers to him as a "fox." In the first century, to complement a ruler, you'd call him a lion, never a fox. A fox connotes an animal who preys on those who are weaker and smaller. No place within Luke's gospel does Herod exhibit any of the fox's traits of cunning or clever. Essentially, Jesus calls Herod a varmint.²

Herod Antipas failed to garner all the property upon the death of his father, Herod the Great. He became defensive. Tried to

¹ This is one of the many rabbit holes I went down to learn about broody hens. I know members of Westminster are well versed in chickens and wanted to confirm my memory. <https://www.freshheggsdaily.blog/2017/08/using-broody-hen-as-surrogate-mother.html?m=1>

² Bruce Chilton, *The Herod: Murder, Politics, and the Art of Succession*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021).

prove himself. He curried favor by building a new city, naming it Tiberias, in honor of the Roman Emperor, Tiberius, but did so on top of a Jewish cemetery. Herod stomped all over the people entrusted to his care.

He married a Maccabean heiress to expand the scope of his reign, even though she was married to his brother. The marriage incited a war that proved disastrous for Herod as well as all those conscripted to fought. John the Baptist criticized this deceitful marriage provoking Herod to imprison and later behead him.

Herod Antipas might rule Jerusalem and portions of Galilee, but was obsessed with power and had only himself in mind. As long as Jerusalem remains under his thumb and rulers like him, Jesus knows that no one gets out from under him alive. And yet Jesus turned his face towards Jerusalem.

If you are going to usher in a new way of life, you paint a vision of hope for the future and bring it about one person at time. Jesus did all that and brought about healing in Galilee. He attracted followers with concrete acts of love. If you are going to lift all people up, you bring along disciples from all areas of life. Jesus did that as well.

Just as vaudeville acts knew that you can only play for so long in Peoria before you need to head to the big city. Jesus had to go to the seat of religious and political authority, to

accomplish his mission to gather in people from east and west and north and south.

Long the spiritual heart of Judaism, Jerusalem existed in the negotiated balance between the religious authorities and Herod. The Pharisees remained in control as long as they controlled any religious revolutionaries.

Within the walled city of Jerusalem, Herod built a four-towered fortress next to the Temple Mount, the holiest of all sites. The imposing structure of the fortress was dedicated to the fearless soldier, Marc Antony, another reminder of brutal combat. ³ Imagine every time you would go to the temple, your religious stronghold, a more imposing, imperial stronghold would loom over you.⁴ Are you safe anywhere and under whose care?

Whoever prompts us to cower in fear, gains power over us. It may begin gradually then escalate as those people whom we fear reinforce that feeling. They accumulate more and more power over us. We fear them more than God and appease their whims more than God's desires. Therefore, Jesus laments, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wing, but you were not willing."

³ Bruce Chilton, *The Herods: Murder, Politics, and the Art of Succession* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021).

⁴ "You Are Here," Preachers' Notes for the Second Sunday in Lent, <https://barngeseeworship.com/>.

Of all the animals Jesus could name to paint an image of his ministry, a chicken does not inspire security. Any of those who heard Jesus describe himself as a mother hen, had to wonder what possible threat he held against Herod and the Pharisees.

He just reinforced an illusion of his weakness. Think of the playground bullies who taunt vulnerable children with “bak, bak, bak,” calling them a chicken.

Long before the time of Christ, chickens had been domesticated by breeding the aggressive tendencies out of them. Maybe that is exactly what God intended by putting on human flesh as Jesus. God chose to be domesticated with us.

Writer Debbie Blue offers this theory:

Maybe God gave up God’s dignity in Jesus Christ because what is most important to God is to be with us, close to us—maybe this is actually essential to God’s nature in some way that is more pressing than God’s grandeur. To become incarnate in the world is to lay oneself open to mistreatment, all the distorting arenas of interpretation and misinterpretation—more so than if one has always kept one’s distance, remaining above the fray. God becomes something we can get our hands on.... it’s not a move that creates reverence—it seems that God might have been going for something else—something closer and deeper.⁵

⁵ Debbie Blue, *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to Birds of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013).

Rather than a concrete bunker, God pursues as in fragile flesh who offers us only the protection of feathered wings. This gentle chicken wants to gather us, like children, who need to be loved into a different way of living.

As I watch, with horror, the news from Ukraine, the similarities to our lectionary reading ring true.

The murder of civilians at a maternity hospital, the seat of fragile life and the evacuation of disabled children and those in cancer treatment tears at our souls. It reminded me of what a fox will do, prey on the defenseless, terrorizing the rest of us.

Putin sacrifices his people to wage a war and then lies to them of the consequences of their actions. In 2019, he claimed democracy has “outlived its purpose.” Multiculturalism, freedom, and human rights must give way.⁶ Give way to his rule?

Playing in the background to his war, is also the news of our country’s’ struggle with democracy. The investigations and trials continue of those who attempted to stop the peaceful transfer of power within our capital on Jan 6th. We need look no further than Putin’s unjust war, not for the benefit of the Russian people, or any people, for the reasons why we cannot walk away from the messiness of democracy. We cannot abdicate our voice and vote to those who seek to kill their challengers. Our country became strong by wrestling with equality and allowing free speech, by rejecting monarchies

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48795764>

and authoritarian rule, and welcoming those from all corners of the earth.

I know I just jumped from Jerusalem in the first century to Moscow and Washington DC in the 21st century, but this story repeats with horror if we ignore the downward trajectory.

Much of the world worships power, then and now. Jesus wanted his followers to see that any allegiance to a ruler who seeks power at any cost, will cost everything. As we deliberate our governing principles, may they never ask us to compromise our faith in God or love for one another.

Let me close with a final thought.

Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem to gather us all in. To gather us all in. So often we think of each of us approaching God, one by one. Yet, Jesus' saving grace comes to unite us together in a community. Like a broody hen, Jesus offers a stronghold to shield *all* of the chicks given to her. Jesus opens his wings to gather *us* under his cross.

Our community of faith is our stronghold. This is where we belong.



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