

February 21, 2016
Lent 2
Mother Hen

Gospel: Luke 13:31-35

³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to [Jesus,] “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³²He 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. ³³Yet 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.’ ³⁴Jerusalem, 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! ³⁵See, 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.’”

How mysterious that Jesus would speak of a *mother hen* as the place of greatest security. You would think he would speak of a soaring eagle with talons as sharp as swords, or a lion that protects the cubs. What about a pit bull trained to lick his chops if you get too near the house?

Yet Jesus refuses to be any king of the jungle here. What he will be is a mother hen who stands between the chicks and a world of hurt. She has no fangs, no claws, no fierce growl, and no bulging muscles. All she has is the willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants them, he will have to go through her first. Which he does, as it turns out, but she will not back off.

The good news, brothers and sisters, is that our safety is found in the least likely places, especially the most vulnerable of places. A soft bird with a downy breast exposed to predators. No wonder the gospel of Jesus Christ is beyond our human measure. We dare call this the way of the Cross.

No wonder, too, that someone like Jesus could never get elected in the kind of political season we are awash in now. Have you noticed? Everybody is out to prove he or she is a strong man or strong woman. Would you vote for someone who said he was your mother hen? How could she have your back? Even our first reading speaks of God in the vocabulary of strength. God promises Abram that he will be his “shield.”

But riddle me this, dearest friends: don't we often have a false sense of security? Not long ago I heard a news report on recent crime statistics. It turns out that gated communities and those that are not, yet who are otherwise similar, have pretty much the same crime rates! So, whether you have a gate and a fence and guards or none of the apparatus of security, apparently makes little difference. Remember: even military bases and forts have their tragedies. I don't pretend to comprehend this.

Moreover, this God whose strength consists in being weak and vulnerable—yes, you heard that right—is a mother hen who *grieves* over her lost children. God himself grieves. “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her

brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" The chicks don't know how good they have it and how much they are hurting the mother hen by not coming to her. Like you and me in relation to the LORD our God.

By the way this is why the gospel acclamation for Lent is so powerful and so heart-rending: "Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." I don't know about you, but when all is said and done that's the only safety and security, the only certainty, that matters. As I like to say, the rest is noise!

During this holy season of Lent, we might ask what keeps us from gathering under Jesus wings. Is it our pride and prized independence? Our suspicion of organized religion? Our desire to be captain of our own ship, the maker of our own destiny? (The old joke is that So-and-So is a self-made man, and he worships his creator!) The need to break away from mom and dad's influence? Our love of doing things our way?

Don't get me wrong, though. The mother hen may be vulnerable, but her determination is fierce. When the Pharisees warn Jesus that King Herod is out to get him (remember what happened to John the Baptist?) and that he should take another path, Jesus resolutely responds, "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.'"

Nothing, not even the prospect of death, will deter the mother hen from being on her way to Jerusalem. Though she might be vulnerable as the foxes of the world see it, her will is unshakable and her purpose steadfast.

When we come forward to break bread and share the cup, let this holy meal be for us the nourishment we need in a world that tempts us to doubt that we are being cared for by a loving God. When we open wide our hands, may their very emptiness be a sign and a promise that our every human need is supplied.

Come, then, to the mother hen who is our God. Find shelter under the shadow of her wings. Then, with determination and good courage, let us serve our neighbor without reserve!

AMEN

The Rev. John Berntsen