

OF FOXES AND CHICKENS¹

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
March 3, 2022

Psalm 27
Luke 13:31-35

The Passion looms large in each one of the four gospel accounts. As one theologian put it, the gospels are “passion narratives with extended introductions.”² Yet those narratives mostly record the swirl of events around Jesus in his last days in the great holy city, Jerusalem, what the people there said and did. The description of Jesus’ physical sufferings is as minimal as the writers can make it. There is much greater interest in Jerusalem itself, how the great earthly city responds to “the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

No gospel pays more attention to Jerusalem than Luke’s. Luke begins and ends in the temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah learns in the temple that he and Elizabeth will have a child. Mary and Joseph bring their own child there when the time comes. Simeon and Anna deliver their prophecies there, and Jesus returns when he is 12 years old to take his place among the teachers of Israel. All told, Luke mentions Jerusalem 90 times in his Gospel, while all the other New Testament writers combined mention it only 49 times. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Luke loves the place—so rich in history and symbol, so dense with expectation and fear. Jerusalem is the dwelling place of God, the place where God’s glory shall be revealed.³ It is also the place where God is betrayed by those who hate the good and love what is evil.⁴ Nothing that happens in Jerusalem is insignificant. When Jerusalem obeys God, the world spins peacefully on its axis. When Jerusalem ignores God, the whole planet wobbles.

Jerusalem, of course, is a world away from us. Here in Pocantico Hills, we know Jerusalem as a historic site, a setting for TV news reports, a destination for that edifying vacation trip we hope to take one day. We don’t imagine ourselves as part of the Jerusalem that Jesus addresses in his lament over the city “that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.” But even if Jesus were to rephrase his lament and direct it to “America” or “Pocantico Hills” or “Union Church,” I suspect we’d still have trouble understanding our relationship with him, our response to his coming, to the salvation he offers, as something that happens as part of a group. We modern Christians tend to see all that almost exclusively in *personal* terms. “Where am I in my spiritual journey?” “Is Jesus Christ my personal Lord and Savior?” “Have I been saved?” “How is this church meeting my needs?”

¹ This sermon draws heavily on the language and imagery of Barbara Brown Taylor in “As a Hen Gathers Her Brood,” *Christian Century*, February 25, 1986, p. 201 and in “Chickens and Foxes,” *Bread of Angels* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1997), 123-127.

² Martin Kahler, cited in Frederica Mathewes-Green, “The Meaning of Christ’s Suffering,” *Books & Culture* Vol. 10, No. 2 (2004), 28-29.

³ Isaiah 24:23.

⁴ Micah 3:2.

Yet so much of the biblical record shows God concerned with salvation and faithfulness in more sweeping terms. God covenants with Israel, that that one nation might be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. God, through the prophets, calls whole cities to repent. God so loves the world that God sends the Son into the world. And the risen Christ commands his church to go and make disciples of all nations. Now don't get me wrong; our individual relationships with God are very important, but it is our life together that makes us the body of Christ, the church. And I don't think that's an accident. That's part of God's plan.

It's good for us to remember that as we gather on this Second Sunday in Lent. The church is more than its individual members. We have a community identity and a community mandate. We stand for something, which it behooves us to recall from time to time. Do we, as a body, resemble Christ or have we taken on the characteristics of someone else? Are we true to our head or are we giving him a headache by yanking away and refusing to belong to him?

In today's gospel lesson, we can hear the kind of anguish we cause Jesus when we do that. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" he says, choked with tears. "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" It is the lament of one whose love has been scorned, whose protection has been rejected.

At risk of his own life, Jesus has brought the precious kingdom of God within the reach of the beloved city of God, but the city of God is not interested. Jerusalem has better things to do than to hide under the shelter of this mother hen's wings. It has a fox as its head, who commands a great deal more respect. Consider the contrast: Jesus has disciples: Herod has soldiers. Jesus serves: Herod rules. Jesus prays for his enemies: Herod kills his. In a contest between a fox and a chicken, whom would you bet on?

Barbara Brown Taylor remarked once that it was curious that Jesus chose a hen when there were so many other animals available, so many other biblical precedents: the mighty eagle of Exodus, or Hosea's stealthy leopard or the proud lion of Judah, mowing down his enemies with a roar. "Compared to any of those, [Taylor said,] "a mother hen does not inspire much confidence. No wonder some of the chicks decided to go with the fox."

But a hen is what Jesus chose, which—if you think about it—is pretty typical of him. He is always turning things upside down, so that children and peasants wind up on top while kings and scholars land on the bottom. He is always wrecking our expectations of how things should turn out by giving prizes to losers and paying the last first. So of course he chooses a chicken, which is about as far from a fox as you can get. That way the options become very clear: you can live by licking your chops or you can die protecting the chicks.

Let there be no mistake about it: Jesus meant to protect the chicks from the foxes but he would not become a fox himself in order to do it. He refused to fight fire with fire. When Herod and his bullies came after Jesus and his brood, he did not produce any lethal weapons to stop them in their tracks. He just put himself between them and the chicks, all fluffed up and hunkered down like a mother hen.

It may have looked like a minor skirmish to those who were there, but that contest between the chicken and the fox turned out to be the cosmic battle of all time, in which the power of tooth and fang was put up against the power of a mother's love for her chicks. And God bet the farm on the hen.

Depending on whom you believe, she won. It did not look that way at first, with feathers all over the place and chicks running for cover. But as time went on, it became clear what she had done. She had refused to run from the foxes, and she had refused to become one of them. Having loved her own who were in the world, she loved them to the end. She died a mother hen, and afterwards she came back to them with teeth marks on her body to make sure they got the point: that the power of foxes could not kill her love for them, nor could it steal them away from her. They might have to go through what she went through in order to get past the foxes, but she would be waiting for them on the other side, with love stronger than death.

When we share the Lord's Supper which our mother hen has given us, we remember what he has done; we stand united with his chicks in every time and place; and we call upon his Holy Spirit to knit us into one body serving the world in his name. By his grace, we become more like him: the church of Christ as a big fluffed up brooding hen, offering warmth and shelter to all kinds of chicks, including orphans, runts, and maybe even a couple of ducks. The church of Christ planting herself between the foxes of this world and the fragile-boned chicks, offering herself up to be eaten before she will sacrifice one of her brood. The church of Christ staying true to whose body she is, by refusing to run from the foxes and refusing to become one of them.

"Who would have thought," Professor Taylor asks, that "being a mother hen offered such opportunities for courage? Maybe that is why the church is called Mother Church." It is where we come to be fed and sheltered, but it is also where we come to stand firm with those who need the same things from us. It is where we grow from chicks into chickens, by giving what we have received, by teaching what we have learned, and by loving the way we ourselves have been loved—by a mother hen who would give his life to gather us under his wings.

Let us pray:

Lord, gather us under your wings: take our lives, with their failures and their fears, all their feeble gestures toward faith, and fill them with your spirit, your selfless love, with the power of your resurrection. So let us do your will until the new Jerusalem fills the earth. Amen.