

Sermon for Lent II Year C 2019  
*A Hen, That's All You Got?*

Back when I was an pastoral intern—over a decade ago now—  
I once asked the children in the pre-school chapel time  
what they thought God's love looked like.  
As you might imagine, I heard all kinds of answers  
but one little boy answered me by drawing a picture.  
A picture I still have.  
He came up to me later in the day to give it to me.  
What did he draw?  
It was a picture of the earth with three crosses on the top of the globe,  
two smaller crosses and one large cross in the center.  
This is God's love, he said.  
There were many reasons his picture moved me—  
knowing his age and his life circumstances.  
Looking at that picture, I knew the marvel Jesus expressed  
at the faith of the Centurion when he said,  
“I have not seen such faith in all Israel!”  
It was the third chapter of the gospel of John  
encapsulated in the crayon drawing of a four-year-old.

So if I asked you to draw a picture of Jesus,  
what would you draw?  
A blue-eyed shepherd holding a staff?  
A lion (as in Aslan of Narnia or lion of the tribe of Judah)?  
A door, a gate, a light in the darkness?  
A bridegroom?  
A loaf of bread and glass of wine?  
Or what about a chicken?  
Would it occur to you to draw a chicken?

Has anyone spent any time around chickens?  
Though I don't have a great deal of experience with chickens,  
I did spend a little time around them when I was around  
the age of 10 to 12.  
My mother's stepmother lived in Lancaster.  
Literally across a small side street,  
there was an Amish farm.  
We always spent at least a week each summer, sometimes two weeks,  
with Aunt Genie and Uncle Billy.  
And during those summer days,  
we got to know and hang around with the Amish family  
across the way.  
They were mainly growers of tobacco in those days,  
but they also kept cows and chickens.  
As a kid from the suburbs, the chickens seemed simultaneously  
hilarious—all the clucking and squawking—  
and pecking about—they couldn't even fly!  
But they were also a bit scary—  
Because they could be fierce when they wanted to be.  
I learned to keep my distance from their sharp beaks.  
Yet there was something sad about their ferocity.  
Something defenseless.  
Something vulnerable.

So to answer my own question—  
If I had to draw a picture of Jesus,  
I would definitely not draw a chicken.  
So what do I or you do with Jesus' self-description:  
*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets  
and stones those who are sent to it!  
How often have I desired to gather children together  
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!"*

A hen, Jesus?  
You mean to tell me, the protection of a mother hen is all we get?

What was Jesus thinking?

If Jesus was wanting to emphasize maternal power, acumen or success there are a number of more appropriate Old Testament (Hebrew) images to make his point. Like God as a “she-bear” from the prophet Hosea (13:8). Or what about the soaring mother eagle from Deuteronomy (32:11)? God as a laboring women from the prophet Isaiah (42:12). God as a mom of a healthy, happy toddler as portrayed in the Psalms or God as a skilled midwife (Psalm 131:2, Psalm 22:9-10).

But, no!

Jesus doesn't choose any of those rather dignified, even majestic images. Instead, on this second Sunday in Lent, Jesus in the gospel of Luke invites us to contemplate a mother hen whose chicks don't want her. Though she stands with her wings wide open, offering welcome, belonging and shelter, her children will not come home to her. Her wings—her arms—are empty. This is the portrait of a mother bereft. A mother in mourning. A mother struggling with failure and futility.

In the verses that precede this heartbreaking description, a group of Pharisees seek to scare Jesus off. They want him to leave the area where he's teaching and healing, because Herod wants to kill him. Though Jesus knows full well that Herod's displeasure is nothing to mess around with (it was Herod Antipas, after all, who ordered the arrest and subsequent beheading of his cousin, John the Baptist), he tells them that he's not afraid of “that fox.”

I have work left to do and I won't be deterred by that bully,  
Jesus says.  
At this point in the story,  
Jesus has set his face towards Jerusalem—  
despite the fact that it is the city that rejects God's messengers,  
even killing them.  
Jesus knows exactly what is awaiting him there.  
But he will not change course.  
Not even if the fox is waiting for him there.

Yet, even as he stands up to the fox,  
Jesus is a mother keening in grief.  
What does this stunning image offer to us for our own Lenten journeys?  
There are three things that strike me as I imagine a Mother Hen God.

The first is to ask, if God is like a Mother Hen,  
what if we—as Christians, the church—  
are called to radical vulnerability?  
Yes, Jesus mocks Herod by calling him a fox.  
But he never argues that the fox *isn't* dangerous.  
He never promises us divine immunity from harm.  
I mean, let's face it—  
if a determined fox wants to kill a brood of downy baby chicks,  
he will find a way to make it so.  
What Jesus the mother hen offers is not the absence of danger,  
but the fullness of his unguarded,  
open-hearted, wholly vulnerable self  
*in the face of* all that threatens and scares us.  
He is willing and promises—at great risk to himself—  
the making of his very being  
into a place of refuge and return for his beloved children.  
For all of his children—even the ones who want to stone and kill him,  
even those who shun the sheltering wings.

What would it take for us to embrace  
Jesus' vulnerability as our strength?  
To trade in our images of a conquering God  
for the mother hen God of today's passage?  
What if we need most is not a fox-like divinity  
who wields power with sly intelligence and sharp teeth,  
but a mother hen who calls us with longing and desperation,  
her wings patiently and bravely open?  
A mother hen who plants herself in the hot center of her children's  
terror, and offers refuge *there*—right there at ground zero,  
where the feathers fly and the blood is shed.

I've seen mother hens gather their chicks under their wings when a  
predator approaches.  
The way they swell with indignation, fear and, above all, courage.  
The way they stand their ground.  
The way they prepare to die, if they have to,  
their children tucked securely beneath their soft,  
vulnerable bodies.  
I can't imagine a more profound or radical picture of our God.  
Can you?

The second thing that strikes me about Jesus in today's gospel passage is  
what if we are called to lamentation?  
You don't have to be a parent to mourn missed opportunities,  
broken promises, or crushed hopes.  
All of us—regardless of our circumstances—  
know what it's like to be rejected.  
We know the pain of watching someone  
we care about slowly self-destruct before our eyes.  
We carry painful memories of unrequited love,  
unmet hopes, and unfulfilled dreams.

In today's gospel, Jesus grieves for his lost and wandering children.  
For the little ones who will not come home.

For the city that will not welcome its savior.  
For the endangered multitudes  
who refuse to recognize the peril that awaits them.  
His is the lamentation of long, thwarted, and helpless yearning—  
*How often have I desired to gather you—but you were unwilling!*  
It is a lamentation for all that could have been  
in this broken, rebellious, clueless world.  
It is a lamentation for the real limits we live with as human beings.  
The lasting, malingering wounds.  
Sometimes, like Jesus the mother hen,  
we can't do what we most desire to do.  
We can't give what we deeply long to give.  
We can't make those we love, love us.

How might we be called to lamentation during this season of Lent?  
What do you yearn for that eludes you?  
What missed chances, failed efforts, or broken dreams tug at your heart  
and call you into mourning?  
How might we, the Church, lament with Jesus over our homes,  
our cities, our countries, our planet?  
How might we stand with him in the Jerusalem of our lives,  
and weep our sorrow into new hope?

Finally, this passage calls us to return.  
“You were not willing,” Jesus tells his wandering children.  
You would not come back.  
You would not relinquish your right to self-determination and  
independence, even when your life depended on it.  
The image of chicks snuggling under a mother hen's wings is an image  
of gathering, of community, of intentional oneness.  
It requires a return.  
A surrender.  
A tempering of our wild lone-rangerism.  
What in us is “not willing” to be gathered?  
Not willing to surrender to community?

To a larger whole?  
To the wings of God's care and to God's people?  
Where in our lives have we chosen to go it alone,  
spurning love because love is too risky?  
Or too messy? Or just plain old inconvenient?

I confess, a loving vulnerable mother hen God  
seems the riskiest thing I can imagine placing my faith and hope in.  
It seems to me a lion would be preferable, perhaps.  
Maybe even the infuriated bear.

And yet . . .

A yearning mother hen is the mother we belong to.  
She's the one weeping for us.  
She's the one calling us home.  
Her body and her heart are on the line,  
and yet her desire is fixed on us.  
She will never, ever stop calling us home.

Those words, *how often have I desired to gather you*,  
have hit their mark with me this Lent. What about you?

During this wilderness season of repentance and transformation,  
I pray that the desire of Jesus becomes our desire too.  
May the way of the mother hen—the way of vulnerability,  
sorrow, hope, and eternal welcome lead us all home.