

I have read this gospel over and over again this past week and I've struggled with it nearly everyday. How do these words that Jesus speaks to the religious rulers and systems of his day apply to our own time and space? What 'good news' can we hear for the difficulties we face today?

At first I thought my trouble was that I've got a "complicated" history with chickens. When I was growing up, my family was one of the few farms left who still had a decent number of chickens. We sold eggs to the grocery store and we butchered enough boilers to fill a freezer. I don't think I'll ever forget the smell of wet feathers!

And then I had to gather eggs, which I hated if it was after dark and you had to deal with hens still sitting on the nest, and don't even get me started on roosters. Let's just say they picked on me just as much as I picked on them.

But I also have some more favorable chicken memories. I remember waking up on summer mornings with the windows open and a cool breeze carrying the sounds of a new day through the air. Among those sounds were the crows and cackles of chickens.

In Haiti, we were awoken by roosters nearly every morning (and sometimes throughout the night). It was pretty annoying to most people but it was a comforting sound for me. A sound that took me back to my boyhood when I was under the protective wings of my parents and life seemed a lot simpler.

And with all of this "history" going on inside my head, I've been trying to figure out how to preach this text. At first it seems pretty straight forward. God is like a mother hen who desires only to protect her brood. All that's needed is for the little rascals to stay put when danger and temptation come and not try to wander off on their own.

It's a wonderful image that speaks about protection and care and it would seem all I have to do in a sermon is convince you of the importance of remaining under the wings of God. I could tell you powerful stories of a mother birds protecting their young or show a picture of young chicks under sheltering wings and tell you that's how it is with God and us.

But then I get stuck on the words Jesus actually used. Despite his desire to the contrary, Jesus looks over Jerusalem and **laments** that the metaphor does not apply! Protection never actually happens under the "wings" of God's care but it's not for lack of trying by the hen.

The problem is with that brood of hers. They don't seem to want her care. They constantly scatter and run off thinking they know best. And they suffer the consequences because of it. It's a condensed version of the entire old testament story! Promise of love and care and protection offered by God and willful disobedience on the part of the people.

So where does this leave us? Are we those wayward little chicks? Are we somehow those people whom Paul says are living as "enemies of the cross of Christ"? Are we only concerned with short-term thinking based on the earthly values of success and security? Do we live selfishly at the expense of others? Do we spend our time and our talent and our energy chasing after things that really have no power to give us the LIFE we so deeply desire? And do we dismiss, slander, ignore, or metaphorically 'stone' those messengers who try to tell us otherwise?

I think if we are truly honest the answer would have to be an emphatic YES. The little article on the back of the bulletin has it right. Despite good intentions, we often find ourselves very far away from God and God's intentions for our lives.

So now what? Do you see why I've had a difficult time with this text? Not only am I finding myself as one of those wayward chicks, I'm also starting to realize that I don't really have any power to find my way back. Sure I could vow to "do better" and I could implore all of you to do the same. I could use scare tactics and threats of eternal consequences to frighten people into staying close to God. Lord knows it's been done before. But fear does not birth LIFE. Fear only gives death more power.

But thanks be to God there is more truth in our text today than simply the truth about us. More importantly is the truth about God. God's love is bigger than our fear, bigger than our failure, bigger than our inability. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem all right but in Jerusalem he will be blessed as the one who comes in the name of the Lord. His work began with healing and feeding and casting out evil, but in Jerusalem it will find completion as the mother hen gives her life so that the wandering brood might be saved from the dangers that threaten them.

In Jerusalem love sacrifices but love also triumphs. For death is followed by resurrection on the third day. New life springs up from brokenness and despair. The light of Easter shines in every dark place, including all the nooks and crannies little chicks find themselves stuck in.

So take heart! If you are feeling lost today,
if you have wandered off from the care and promise of God,
if life seems to be either so empty (or so full) that fear is overtaking you...

- there is hope for a new start!

We can return to the Lord our God, the God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We can dare to love one another as Christ has loved us.

Because the truth of the cross is this: God follows us when we stray. Grace is amazing that way! There is no place the chicks can go that the hen is not already there - offering courage, healing, hope and the power to live in a completely new way. Those of us who went to Haiti saw examples of this nearly everywhere we went. Out of despair, God is birthing new life and we have the chance to play a part in that creation.

God is faithful. Trust in that faithfulness and then be transformed. Our citizenship, our ultimate destiny is with God. Let us start living like that in the here and now with lives of generosity, grace, forgiveness and love. Those are the powers that defeat evil and give life to the world. Amen.