

2 Lent Luke 13:31-35
Christ and Grace March 17, 2019
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When I was ten, for some reason my mom cannot explain to me now, she allowed me to have a real baby chick for Easter. Now we lived within city limits, so I have no idea what we were going to do with that chick when it grew to full size, as there were ordinances forbidding chickens back then. This was before the local food movement became popular, before we realized that chickens, even in the city, would provide a sustainable food source, create compost, devour insects, and recycle our grass clippings, weeds, and kitchen scraps into fresh eggs!

But there I was with this illegal chicken. Sadly the baby chick got sick and died after about a month, perhaps proving that the raising of chicks should not be left to children. But in the short time I had that cute fluffy chick, we grew very attached to each other. Within a few days that chick knew who I was and it followed me everywhere. If I sat on the floor the chick would jump right up and happily sit in my lap. If I left the room it would make a fuss.

As it turns out, newly hatched chicks will follow almost anything that has eyes and moves. Psychologists call this imprinting. After the chick follows something, a part of the brain recognizes and imprints on the individual being followed. Chicks have a self-protecting instinct to follow, and then they learn what they are following. And as I learned, baby chicks don't always follow the mother hen – sometimes they follow a little girl ill equipped to care for them.

Our gospel reading today is a bit of a barnyard menagerie. There are chicks and a hen and a fox mentioned in this account in which Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem. In Luke's gospel, Jerusalem is very important. In fact, Luke begins and ends his story in the temple in Jerusalem. It's in the temple that Zechariah and Elizabeth learn they will have a child. It's to the temple that Mary and Joseph bring the infant Jesus for Simeon and Anna to see and prophesy his future. It's to the temple that Jesus returns when he is 12 years old causing his parents great angst when they cannot find him. Jerusalem is mentioned 90 times in Luke, and only a total of 49 times in all other New Testament writings. Clearly Jerusalem was very important to Luke, as it was to the prophets of old. Jerusalem was always known to be the place where God dwelled. Jesus was making his way to Jerusalem when some Pharisees warned him that Herod wanted to kill him. Hearing this, Jesus hardly missed a step – he called Herod a fox, and continued on his way, telling the Pharisees it was impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem. But thinking about Jerusalem seemed to have caused Jesus great sorrow and he began to lament for the city. Jesus revealed his great desire to gather the children of Jerusalem as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, yet they were not willing.

What a startling image of God, of Christ – that of a mother hen protecting her children from the fox in their midst. It's not the typical male imagery of father or king; it's a feminine image of a compassionate mother hen with deep affection and tenderness for her brood. The hen is willing to sacrifice her life for her chicks if they will only take refuge under her wings. The hen spreads her wings to cover the brood, and in doing so exposes her chest, making herself vulnerable to the predator. The safety of the chick depends on it recognizing its mother and then following her.

This is the kind of love God has had for us since the beginning. God has longed to cover us with wings of love and protect us from evil since creation, from the time of Noah and the flood, from the time of the covenant promise to Sarah and Abraham, from the time of Moses, Deborah and the Judges of Israel, from the time of the kings, prophets and psalmists. As many times as we have failed to respond to God's love, God has reached out to us again and again. As many times as we have followed not the mother hen but the fox, God has wept for us.

The world is full of foxes that will lead us away from God's love and goodness. Sadly we are all too aware of this truth. We have known loved ones who have wasted their lives in unhealthy relationships, or in chasing after misplaced priorities. We have known ourselves to chase after foxes, realizing too late the folly of following fame, fortune, or unhealthy desire.

I have a friend who fox hunts in Nelson County. In answer to the claims that foxhunting is inhumane, she tells me that foxes are...well... foxy. They almost always outfox the hunters! So it is with those earthly, material things we chase after only to lose the trail and end up causing pain to others and to ourselves. God knows our pain in knowing that we cannot help anyone who does not want to be helped, we cannot welcome them into our open arms unless they want to be there.

Knowing how we feel about our loved ones who follow the foxes of this world, we can begin to understand how God's heart breaks when we choose to imprint on the fox and not on the mother hen, when we choose the things of this world rather than the eternal love of God.

Even so, God waits with arms outstretched, just as God has since creation, just as Jesus did on the cross. The baby chick that imprinted on me and followed me was, in a way, following a fox. I could not properly care for that chick, not in the way its mother would have. What is it in life that we imprint on and follow? Is it the many foxes of this world or do we follow Jesus the mother hen, who so wants to gather us under the protective shadow of her wings? How long until we follow Jesus to Jerusalem, until we choose to dwell with God?

On a hill just outside of Jerusalem there is a chapel called Dominus Flevit, which in Latin means the Lord wept. On the altar there is a mosaic medallion of a white hen with a golden halo around her head. Her red comb resembles a crown, and her wings are spread wide to shelter the pale yellow chicks that crowd around her feet. There are seven of them, with black dots for eyes and orange dots for beaks. They look happy to be there. The hen looks ready to spit fire if anyone comes near her babies.

The medallion is rimmed with red words in Latin. Translated into English they read, "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!" The last phrase is set outside the circle, in a pool of red underneath the chicks' feet: you were not willing.¹ And what of us? Are we willing? Amen.

¹ Description of the mosaic by Barbara Brown Taylor from "As a Hen Gathers Her Brood"
<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=638>