

FOXES AND HENS

Luke 13:31-35

I imagine most country folk have their own chicken stories. Well, I have a fairly long history with chickens, and it is not pretty. The first was the time I took care of some younger cousins for two weeks while their parents were on vacation. As you have probably guessed...one of their daily chores was to gather the eggs in the henhouse. I first thought, "How hard can this be? People have been gathering eggs since the beginning of time. You just go into the henhouse, stick your hand under the chicken and voila...you retrieve an egg!" So, the first morning we set out basket in hand with my 7 and 5 year old cousins (I was in my early 20's). We march out; open the door to the henhouse only to be promptly scolded by the rooster!! Still we ventured forth, and gingerly gathered the eggs. Phew...first day done. The second day, was a little tougher since I knew what I was facing, still we went. By the third day, the rooster had not only completely sized me up, he had brought his hens on board and with their added pecking at hands searching for eggs we did not get any eggs that day. By the end of the first week, I decided my Aunt and Uncle were going to increase their flock that year and I never returned to the hen house again!!

Fast forward 9 or 10 years. Vern and I were still newlyweds and I was quite willing to agree with just about anything he suggested. However, I drew the line at raising chickens, "They are nasty, dirty birds and I will not take care of them!" Well one day I head to the barn only to find 4 baby chicks in a cardboard box!!! I was not a happy camper. "But oh Elizabeth," Vern pleaded, "They are just babies...aren't they just adorable." "Besides, just think of all the fresh eggs we will have!" "Harrumph," I responded and proceeded to tell him in no uncertain terms that I was not going to have anything whatsoever to do with his blasted chickens. Well the spring time went on, the chicks grew and grew, and Vern waited and waited for them to start laying eggs. One day, I was headed to the barn with a snack for Vern. I saw the adult chickens near the milk house and headed that way. I was still a good 20 yards away when two of those birds took off after me. After a few stunned seconds I took off for the safety of the house. From that time on every time I went outdoors, those two ROOSTERS made a beeline for me. Vern had been given 4 rooster chicks. Finally, it was only by carrying a bat that I made it safely to the barn. One day I told Vern he needed to make a choice...either the roosters went or I did. I never did find out what happened to them, and I NEVER saw them again! No sirree Bob...no more chickens for us!!

Jesus did not seem to have the same problem with chickens, hens in particular. *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killer of prophets, abuser of the messengers of God! How often I've longed to gather your children, gather your children like a hen, Her brood safe under her wings—but you refused and turned away!* There is so much packed in these 5 short verses in our text today that it is hard to know where to begin. Earlier in our reading the Pharisees come to warn Jesus that Herod is set to kill him, Jesus responds, "*Tell that fox I have not time for him now.*" It is worth noting that it is the Pharisees, the very ones who see Jesus as a huge threat to their status quo, are the ones who are warning him. Have they had a change of heart? The general consensus among scholars is that

they have not, but have an ulterior motive. We have seen how Jesus responds to this warning calling Herod a “fox” and the fact that he specifically gives the message to the Pharisees to deliver suggests that he knows they are in cahoots with Herod. (Feasting on the Word, Year C, page 70)

The taunt Jesus returns to Herod is designed both to reassure and to annoy Antipas. It is reassuring in that he makes it clear that he is leaving for Jerusalem at the end of three days, meaning Herod will not have to deal with him. The rest of the response would no doubt have been understood as disrespectful, however, because Jesus essentially claims that Herod is incapable of killing him. No prophet is ever assassinated in Israel anywhere but in Jerusalem, says Jesus. In this remarkable statement, Jesus demonstrates his lack of fear of Herod as well as the reason for his long journey. He is going there because he is a prophet with a message from God for the city - and because he must be killed there, like so many other prophets before him, in order to fulfill his destiny. (Homiletics Online, 2001).

In spite of this, Jesus still grieves for the city and I believe for all even to this present day that ignore God’s plan of Salvation. Here Jesus refers to his own longing to save the city with the same image used in Isaiah 31:5, that of God as a bird hovering protectively over Jerusalem. The image of God's sheltering wings under which the people find refuge is found in Deuteronomy 32:11; Ruth 2:12; Psalm 17:8; 57:1; 61:4; 91:4. This is the only explicitly feminine image used of Christ himself in the Gospels – that of a mother hen protecting her chicks.

As we have surely witnessed this year, it is not uncommon for fires to sweep across the prairies [of the western United States and Canada] with great speed and intense heat. They are, obviously, a terrifying spectacle, and often lives are lost. One of the areas of life that suffers most is the small animal kingdom. But the prairie chicken, a wild, grouse like fowl, has an astonishing way of handling a prairie fire. At the first hint of trouble, the hen calls out to her chicks, who rush under her wings; she ruffles her feathers and squats down protectively on them. As the fire sweeps by, the mother hen simply dies in the heat, singed to a black lump, but more often than not, the chicks survive the quickly passing fire. It’s incredible that a hen will be so devoted, even to death, for her children.

And likewise, Christ is devoted to us. In a *Christian Century* piece, Barbara Brown Taylor wrote about how a hen's heart and other vital organs are completely exposed to the fox when her wings are open. This is the posture Jesus takes figuratively, even as he is warned about "that fox," Herod. He will eventually take such a posture literally, with arms wide open to gather all people to himself. The hen willingly gave up her life for her children – just as Jesus willingly gave his life up for all. And, he laments for Jerusalem, the city that kills prophets and abuses the messengers of God. Despite Jesus’ desire to sweep up the people, they refuse and turn away choosing their own fate. The NIV version of the opening of verse 35 uses a house in place of a “temple,” as metaphor for our faith journey. *Look, your house is left to you desolate.*

When Vern and I moved to the Tidewater area for our first appointment, I was struck and deeply saddened with the large numbers of abandoned homes. No doubt, at one point they were

alive with the many sounds of life a family brings. I could picture these houses vibrant, bright with a new coat of paint, well-tended rose bushes and Crepe myrtle, swing sets with children daring to swing higher and higher, windows with curtains billowing out with the breeze.

But now they sat empty and alone...desolate and void. Somewhere along the years, their owners stopped caring and the houses fell into disrepair. What about our spiritual houses? They too will fall into a state of disrepair when unattended. Lent is a gift of time for each one of us to reflect and perhaps do some spring cleaning of our spiritual houses. Has Jesus been invited into all the rooms of your spiritual houses? A seminary professor of mine once stated, *"Salvation is a life long journey, because there are always parts of my heart that have not yet heard the gospel."* Are there rooms where Jesus needs to do some spring cleaning? The rooms might have names like, "anger," "fear," "bitterness," "revenge". They could also be called, "loneliness," "grief," "abuse," "blame," For these next four weeks of Lent, I invite you to do some exploring in your spiritual houses. If there is a room that needs to meet Jesus Christ, by all means, invite Him in. The love of Jesus will sweep away the cobwebs, fix the broken windows and perhaps even put on a fresh coat of paint.

Every room of your heart needs to hear the good news. Every room needs to hear that you are beloved, precious child of God and beautiful to behold.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.