

# Full to the Brim: Under God's Wing

Luke 13:31-35  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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On the western slope of the Mount of Olives, just across the Kidron Valley from the old walled city of Jerusalem, sits the Garden of Gethsemane. The root system of the olive trees there are claimed to be well over 1000 years old. Next to the garden sits a small Roman Catholic Franciscan chapel named **Dominus Flevit**. Dominus Flevit is Latin for "**the Lord wept**". The structure of this small building is claimed to resemble a teardrop.



The chapel's name comes from a passage from the gospel of Luke (19:41-44), which contains the account of Jesus' lament over the sad state of affairs of Jerusalem – especially their inability to recognize and seek peace.



According to tradition, it was at 'that spot' where Jesus wept as he looked upon the city that had refused his ministry efforts and his prophetic message of God's kin-dom being at hand. Inside this small beautiful chapel there is an altar table centered beneath a high arched window that looks directly out over the old city, framing it in a dramatic, panoramic fashion. It almost looks like a painting of the city, yet it's the

real live thing. I once stood in absolute wonder at that exact same spot during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem back in 1993 during my final year in seminary.

On the front of the altar is a remarkably detailed round tile **mosaic**. It is the depiction of a **mother hen** with a golden halo around her head. During the Time With the Children this morning, I showed several examples of how artists have portrayed images of God. They are basically all male.

But then I showed them a photo of this mosaic of a mother hen spreading her wings to protect her young. This image is also in this morning's worship bulletin for you to look at more closely. I love the fact that this biblical female image of Jesus, and therefore of God, comes just days after International Women's Day, and during this National Women's History Month, with its theme, "Providing Healing, Promoting Hope."



Taking a closer look at that mosaic, the red comb upon the mother hen's head resembles a crown. Her wings are spread wide to shelter the pale-yellow chicks that crowd around her feet. There are seven of them – the biblical number for completeness and wholeness. The mosaic is rimmed with Latin words in red tiles. Those words come from part of today's gospel text, **Luke 13:34**. Translated into English the verse reads, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" And then as part of the mosaic itself, "**How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,**

**and you were not willing.**" For emphasis, that last phrase is set inside the circle in a pool of red directly underneath the baby chick's feet: *you were not willing*.

The rich imagery of this passage is quite poignant and relevant. Understanding the depth of Jesus' lament has a parallel to parents who seek to protect their children. But just as there's only so much a parent can do – especially when the child isn't willing, or perhaps not able, there was only so much Jesus could do to help those in Jerusalem. The visual image implies that all Jesus could do was to open his arms. He wouldn't force anyone to walk into them. And notice that this is the most vulnerable posture there is for a bird – wings spread, breast exposed. Yet, this is a powerful image of Jesus', therefore of God's, selfless and inclusive love.

Jesus shares this maternal female image after a warning from somewhat sympathetic Pharisees that Herod (that's Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great) wants to kill Jesus. Jesus responds by calling Herod a "**fox**". While we associate that image as one of being clever and intelligent, back in those days it **represented the threat of a cunning predator, deceitful, and malicious**. A fox is also a word of defiance, since a "lion" would have been the customary, flattering image for royal authority. Yes, Jesus disses Herod. Jesus also responds that he must be on his way and will not be distracted or deterred from carrying out his mission and ministry. Saying that, he does not dismiss the fact that this will put him and his very life in jeopardy.

But back to the image of the mother hen protecting her young. The authors of the Lenten resource we are using this year, **A Sanctified Art**, make a connection with this passage of scripture to the theme, "Full to the Brim: Under God's Wing". They write the following very comforting and pastoral words:

God is our refuge. There is nothing that can separate you from God, or could keep God from gathering you in, protecting you fiercely. Jesus' lament for Jerusalem is seemingly counter to how he is treated by Jerusalem. And yet, we receive grace upon grace, even if not deserved.

Jesus as a mother hen is an image of fierce love and protection. You are a precious child of God. God longs for you. God will gather you in. No matter how much we try to separate ourselves from God, God will run to protect us. God's love for us is fuller than we can imagine.

Comforting and uplifting words indeed. Much of this sentiment is also found in the psalmist's words in our Old Testament lesson for today, Psalm 27, which reads, in part:

<sup>1</sup> The Lord is my light and my salvation;  
whom shall I fear?  
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;  
of whom shall I be afraid?

<sup>2</sup> When evildoers assail me  
to devour my flesh—  
my adversaries and foes—  
they shall stumble and fall.

<sup>3</sup> Though an army encamp against me,  
 my heart shall not fear;  
 though war rise up against me,  
 yet I will be confident...

<sup>5</sup> For God will hide me in God's shelter  
 in the day of trouble;  
 God will conceal me under the cover of God's tent;  
 God will set me high on a rock...

And the psalmist, concludes with:

<sup>13</sup> I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord  
 in the land of the living.

<sup>14</sup> Wait for the Lord;  
 be strong, and let your heart take courage;  
 wait for the Lord!

Reflecting on this, Teri McDowell Ott, editor and publisher of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, writes in her commentary:

For those whose enemies are circling, whose safety and security are threatened and God seems nowhere to be found, Psalm 27 is a helpful and hopeful word. Wait for the Lord. Be strong. Have courage. Seek God's face and you shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

In similarly hopeful terms, the Rev. Ashley DeTar Birt writes in her commentary in the *A Sanctified Art* resource:

Jerusalem has not always treated Jesus particularly well, and yet it is clear that he still loves it so very deeply. All he wants is to protect it, like a mother hen protects her brood. Jerusalem's actions can't and don't change that, for that is what true, unconditional love actually looks like. We can be frustrating, we can be challenging, we can be difficult. We might even, intentionally or unintentionally, try to push God away. Yet God will remain with us, still loving us because God's love never ends. Know that you are loved, no matter what you do.

**In the context of “Full to the Brim: Under God’s Wing”, I understand, appreciate, and affirm God’s unconditional and ever-present love and care for our well-being. Have we not all heard preachers proclaim that God will provide us with protection?**

Now, that’s probably how I would have ended this sermon a few decades ago. **But I find that interpretation lacking.** So, take a deep breath and hold on. I say that in light of the reality of what actually has happened and is currently happening in the real world. **Yes, God desires our protection, to cover and shelter us with God’s wings. But tell me how this bears out with actual, physical protection to anyone who is seriously injured or killed?** How does anyone square words of God's protection from the atrocities occurring at this very moment in **Ukraine**, with those who are perishing in this war, Ukrainians and Russians alike. **How were or are they being protected by God, under God’s wing?**

After declaring that God is his light, salvation, and stronghold, the psalmist goes on to question, **“Whom shall I fear...of whom shall I be afraid? For those still struggling to stay alive in Ukraine, are they not to be afraid? Are we not to be afraid for them?** How do they square that with traditional religious teaching that God is their protection?

What does this say to anyone's, including your and my, understanding of the nature and character of God – of Who God Is, and what God does and/or does not do? **How are they to “Wait for the Lord”?** Tell that also to the families and those who have died from COVID-19 who put their trust in God for the protection which is promised throughout the Bible. The number killed by the pandemic is now over 6 million worldwide. Tell that to those being abused, to those who have died because of gun violence.

**Pastors and preachers striving to focus on the good news of the gospel are not supposed to express their doubts about such things. But I cannot stand behind this pulpit today and not admit that I struggle mightily with the theological notion that God provides protection.** It is, and has for quite some time, causing me to **reassess my understanding of the concept of protection of which the Bible speaks** – at least as it applies in this life in the here and now. As author and progressive Christian activist John Pavlovitz has recently stated, **“It’s a matter of life arguing with your theology.”**

I, and I know some of you, am way beyond the platitude of simply claiming, “It’s all just God’s will and it’s not ours to understand. After all God is in control.” **What I do understand is that evil is real.** We see it daily in the news. **And evil often has its way,** including the atrocities associated with war. Including the atrocity that eventually happened to Jesus. **So yes, I’m confused when it comes to understanding just how God shelters us under God’s wing.**

And yet, even with that confusion, I heartily affirm that God is our light and our salvation, the stronghold of our lives. And I believe that God does indeed desire to shield us from the harms of this world. And in that way, God does indeed fit this image of a compassionate, caring, maternal, outstretched posture to gather us in. I just can’t square that when it comes to protection. **And yet, I still pray for God’s protection, for all in harm’s way, for you and your families, for myself.**

Divine mystery can be quite frustrating! That’s not much of a closing statement for a sermon, but that’s all I have at this point.

Amen.