

Who Wins? The Fox or the Hen?

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

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As most of you know, I was fortunate to join an Interfaith trip sponsored by Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry (TMM) to Israel and Palestine last September. That wasn't my first trip there, however. Twenty-five years earlier, back in January of 1993 during my final year in seminary, two of my professors, of Old Testament and New Testament Biblical Studies at San Francisco Theological Seminary, led a group of 35 of us on an educational and inspirational three-week tour of Israel, Egypt, the Sinai Peninsula, and Jordan. Three years later, in 1996, those same two professors led another trip, this time to Greece, Turkey, and the city of Rome. I was on that remarkable trip as well. Between these two trips combined, I was able to visit a vast majority of the geographical sites recorded in the Bible. One of the greatest benefits of visually seeing those actual locations in person is that it has made biblical stories come alive for me.

Though most of us didn't buy into the tourist industry's insistence of the historicity and the "exact spot" theory of where each biblical event supposedly occurred (such as the "exact spot" where Moses encountered the burning bush, or where Jesus fed the 5000), I was indeed moved when standing on Mt. Sinai knowing Moses actually stood somewhere on that mountain, and standing at the same shoreline of the Sea of Galilee where Jesus of Nazareth actually walked and taught 2000 years earlier. It was a powerful and spiritual experience for me to gaze upon the same horizons that Jesus gazed upon.

During the trip to Jerusalem last fall, as well as during that previous trip, I stood the western slope of the Mount of Olives, just across the Kidron Valley from the old walled city of Jerusalem. That's where the Garden of Gethsemane is located, including olive trees whose root systems are claimed to be well over 1000 years old. Next to the garden sits a small Roman Catholic Franciscan chapel named **Dominus Flevit**.

I would like to draw your attention now to the back of the bulletin that displays a few pictures of the chapel. Dominus Flevit is Latin for "the Lord wept". The structure of the 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 message and ministry efforts.

Inside the small beautiful chapel there is an altar 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. On the front of the altar is a remarkably detailed round **mosaic**. It is the depiction of a **mother hen** with a golden halo around her head. The red comb upon her 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 passage reads,

“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.**” 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. 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, there was only so much Jesus could do to help 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’ selfless and inclusive love.

I believe that we are called to take a similar posture as well. In modeling our ministry on Jesus’ ministry, we are led to ask of ourselves: **How vulnerable are we willing to be in continuing to grow into the inclusive congregation and nurturing ministry that we believe God is calling us?**

Back in Jesus’ day, this **image of a mother hen** was probably a curious choice. Where’s the biblical precedent for that? Why not the mighty eagle found in the book of Exodus, or Hosea’s stealthy leopard? Why not the proud lion of Judah, mowing down his enemies with a roar? Compared to any of those, a mother hen does not inspire much confidence. Not only that, it is one of the few female images used in the Bible to describe not only Jesus, but God as well. This is the image that is used when Jesus laments over the rejection that the city of Jerusalem has had for its prophets, the rejection which will soon include Jesus himself.

It got me thinking this week, **what would Jesus’ lament be today if he were looking over the city of Tulsa**, over the state of Oklahoma, over this country, over the entire world? And this weekend, in particular, over the killing of Muslims as they prayed in a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, massacred by an anti-immigrant, white supremacist? Beware, reject, and speak out against anti-immigrant rhetoric. Beware, reject, and speak out against anti-people of color rhetoric. I don’t think anyone would doubt that Jesus would be found weeping, just as he did when looking upon the condition of Jerusalem.

In today’s biblical text there is another image of an animal portrayed, that of a fox. The fox represents a threat as a cunning predator. In this case, the threat came from Herod Antipas, the Roman-approved Jewish governor over the region of Galilee. Herod had previously eliminated John the Baptist by having him beheaded. **In Luke’s story, Jesus calls Herod a “fox.” It is the fox that tries to kill the mother hen.** Who will win? In the short-term, Herod, as the predator, will succeed in contributing to Jesus’ execution. Yet ultimately, of course, it is the caring and nurturing mother hen, Jesus – and therefore God – who prevail.

All in all, this passage from Luke is quite a menagerie. In the rich symbolic world of these verses, evil threatens in the form of a fox, and the mother hen laments because her young are exposed but will not accept her instruction and protection. An important element in all this for us during this season of Lent can be in **recognizing God – the Divine Sacred Presence in our midst – as a caring and sheltering mother, a mother who hopes that we will listen to and then act upon her wise instructions.**

Jesus’ compassion led him to weep when he considered the plight of those living in the city he loved. Likewise, the plight of those living here in Tulsa, especially those in

dire need and those who are potential targets of hate crimes, should move us to weep out of compassion as well. And then, to see it as a call to action.

I want to briefly focus our attention now on something that may make a big impact on your spiritual journey of faith. Jesus said, "How often have I *desired* to gather your children together..." (Luke 13:34). Presbyterian pastor, John Wurster, reflects in a commentary released this week by *The Presbyterian Outlook*, "With great feeling, great longing, Jesus seeks to gather us to himself, to bring us close, hold us, shelter us, keep us." It's a Divine desire for relationship. I bring this up because **many don't see God as desiring us, longing for us**. Many are still likely to see God as judging us or correcting us or punishing us or testing us or condemning us. Many still see God as distant and disinterested – up there, far away somewhere. **But this biblical text shows us that in Jesus, God is close, seeking us out, longing for us**. Why? Because God yearns to show us who we truly are, how beautifully we've been made, how deep is our capacity for goodness and blessing. God's desire is to uncover for us the love that is at the core of our being, which we tend to ignore even as we look and struggle for affirmation elsewhere. God longs for us to behold our true selves, intrinsically connected to the God whose image we bear.

Here's something to ponder this week. What if we could claim the oneness with God planted deep within us – and nurture it and trust it? What if we were willing to admit our dependence and take shelter under God's wings? What if in yielding to God's desire for us we awakened our own desire for God, realizing that what we've been looking for after all is the One who has been longing for us after all? Just something for all of us to consider as we reflect upon our journey through the wilderness of Lent.

Amen.

Resources:

John Wurster, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 3-17-19. Rev. Wurster is the pastor of St. Philip Presbyterian Church in Houston.