

UNDER HEN'S WINGS

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 27; Luke 13:31-35

In most of the gospel characterizations Jesus and the Pharisees are adversaries. They are his interlocutors, attempting to embarrass him, they pose awkward questions too complicated to answer, always seeking to discredit him in the eyes of his followers.

There are a few notable exceptions among the Pharisees. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, the one who came to Jesus by night for tutoring, the one who had difficulty imagining how it was possible for a grown man to reenter the womb and be born again. A literalist, to say the least.

And there was Gamaliel, who after Jesus' death warned his colleagues not to take any action against Jesus' followers because if what was said of Jesus was true, they would be foolish to be remembered for all time as those who opposed something born of God. A sensible approach.

But here in Luke's gospel in the 13th chapter, Jesus receives word from some Pharisees that Herod is out to get him, and if Jesus has any sense at all, he will get out of town to avoid Herod's reach. The scholars are torn about the motivations behind this warning. They are not sure whether this portrayal of the Pharisees is disingenuous or not. Are they just trying to get Jesus to go away? Or is there really a plot hatching against Jesus' life? Are they jealous of the crowds that are starting to form around him, or are they, at this early stage, genuinely concerned for one of their own people who is upsetting the political apple cart and whose life is in danger.

We don't know the answer to these questions for certain, even though there is ample evidence that Jesus does not trust the Pharisees as a matter of principle. After all, he has already said of them, "Beware the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy." And even earlier in Luke's gospel, he has warned the people that the Pharisees are "full of greed and wickedness." So there is not much love lost between the two.

Herod was not much better in Jesus' eyes. From the birth narratives we know that Herod was a murderous and an expedient politician, one who had no truck with usurpers or pretenders. A Jew himself, his tenure depended on his keeping the rabble quiet and obedient to Rome. He could, after all, be replaced!

One thing is for sure, Jesus is unafraid of threats to his life as long as he remains in Galilee. If there is a plot to kill him, it will only have a chance when he gets to the royal city where all the prophets meet their fate. For Jerusalem is, in Jesus' mind, where his destiny lies, the city that kills its prophets and stones its saviors.

Call it foolhardy, or call it a premonition, Jesus is unafraid of the plots against him in Galilee. So fearless is he that the Pharisees tell him that Herod is out to get him, and he says, "You go tell that old fox, Herod, I am casting out demons today, and tomorrow, and performing cures, and on the third day I will be on my way. And then, as if he hears his own words and what they mean, a pall falls over his shoulders and he wails a lament for the city that will be his final destination, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing."

It is a powerful image created by Jesus, one of the most overtly feminine references to

God in all of scripture: *the hen who gathers her reluctant brood under her wings*. Jesus was drawing on an ancient Hebrew scriptural allusion from a passage in II Esdras in which God is likened to a mother hen. But on Jesus' lips this image has its most profound and enduring impact.

Jesus' metaphor of himself as a hen gathering his chicks under his wings is especially poignant when laid beside his characterization of Herod as a fox. Herod, after all, is the fox in the hen house. He is the one who creates mistrust and fear, betrayal and confusion. The chicks are reluctant to come under the hen's wings, vulnerable and soft as she is. How appealing in contrast, is the option to skirt behind the fox whose obvious strength and power overwhelm the hen, even on her best day.

Barbara Brown Taylor wonders out loud why it is that Jesus chooses a hen as an image of his protective care, and not a creature more powerful like the mighty eagle of Exodus or the lion of Judah. Either would be a better option than a hen. Taylor writes:

But a hen is what Jesus chooses, which – if you think about it – is pretty typical of him. He is always turning things upside down, so that children and peasants wind up on top while kings and scholars land on the bottom. He is always wrecking our expectations of how things should turn out by giving prizes to losers and paying the last first. So of course he chooses a chicken, which is about as far from a fox as you can get. That way the options become very clear: you can live by licking your chops or you can die protecting the chicks.

The image of God as hen is finally one that lays bare God's vulnerability. When you are the mother hen, all you can do is open your wings wide and gather as many as you can, but you cannot make the chicks come in regardless of how open the invitation.

Thus, Taylor writes,

Jesus won't be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first.

Which he does, as it turns out. He slides up on her one night in the yard while all the babies are asleep. When her cry wakens them, they scatter. She dies the next day where both foxes and chickens can see her – wings spread, breast exposed – without a single chick beneath her feathers. It breaks her heart, but it does not change a thing. If you mean what you say, then this is how you stand.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather your children together, Jesus said, *and you were not willing*. What keeps us from gathering under his wings? Is it our fierce independence? Our suspicion of organized religion? Our desire to be the captain of our own ship, the designer of our own fate? Is it the need to cut the spiritual umbilical and get out from under mother's or dad's influence? Or maybe it's our love of doing things our way and no one else's?

Life has its way with all of us, and sometimes the root is bitter and the fruit is sour. We

turn on God or simply drift away assuming that whatever comes we'll handle, and in the process turn our backs on the hen whose wings are outstretched to receive us.

My friend Leanne Pearce Reed is a young mother and pastor in Birmingham, Alabama. She writes of the arms of God extended toward us in something she experienced in a women's and children's homeless shelter called First Light that her church sponsors. She writes:

We gathered with a few of the residents in the big industrial kitchen to bake bread, communion bread. We poured water and yeast, honey and flour, stirred the dough until it was the right consistency, then turned it out onto the counter to knead it. We talked as we worked, and I was surprised to learn how many of the women had baked bread before. With their hands working the dough, they thought back... to their grandmother's kitchens where they learned how to bake, or to their own kitchens, back when they had homes, when they would welcome the kids home from school with the smell of fresh baked bread or cookies... long before mental illness or addiction or abuse or some other life change brought them to this place. The warmth of a kitchen laden with fresh bread – they provide such comfort, such security. But the women of First Light reminded me that those human places of security and comfort are so fleeting – not only for them, but for us. We run from God, refusing to be gathered. We seek in vain to establish security for ourselves, on our own terms, while the fox licks his chops and the mother hen calls our name.

It has been many years now since I was a student in college in Minnesota. I think back on those years with much fondness, but on the winters there with much less affection. Even so, some of my most treasured memories of those four years have to do with snowy late night visits to an Episcopal church, St. Paul's on the Hill, a few blocks from the college campus. It seemed a great Gothic cavernous womb to me.

Like Nicodemus, I came to it only at night. I am not sure I ever saw it by day. But by night it provided me hospice and warmth, a place to center and focus my life.

My custom was that before an exam, or after a weird date, or in the midst of pulling an all-nighter working on a project, sometime in the middle of the night, I would wrap up against the winter blast in my down jacket and insulated boots and trudge my way the few blocks that lay between my dorm and the church, then enter a door on Summit Avenue into the sanctuary.

It never occurred to me that any one else would ever be there, or that there was any danger involved in going into a dark and secluded place like that. No one, it seemed to me, ever slept in the pews or used the church in the night as a chapel for the soul as I did.

In the coldness of the Northern night, the church was a warm refuge, a place of hospitality and peace. Near the altar hung a lamp that was never extinguished, and sure enough, at two in the morning or three or four when I was there, it burned in the night, symbolizing the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The high vaulted arches over the sanctuary bore wooden trusses that reached for heaven like hands folded together. The winds of the Minnesota midland would howl above me, the only sound in that otherwise quiet place. The roof shifted and settled and groaned sometimes, or ice would fall from its pitch with a great cascade of sound.

But sitting in the last row, never venturing in too far, I always felt a sense of safety, a quietness of spirit that that place gave me every time I went.

Looking back, I realize now that the high vaulted arches of that lovely bulwark church, not so different at all from the trusses and arches above in this sanctuary today, were so much like the outstretched wings of the mothering hen who would gather her chicks beneath her.

Jesus longed to gather Jerusalem's children under his wings, but they were not willing. Instead, those wings were stretched on a cross, wide enough to embrace us all.

Here at the table, he longs to gather us again in the shelter of his wings, in the warmth of this church, in the company of these friends, in the timeliness of our need.

Beneath the shelter of his wings, on this late winter morning, the table is set and all are invited. Come if you are able, come if you ready, come if you possibly can. There is always enough to eat and always enough room for one more.

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