

Jeremiah 22:1-9
Second Sunday of Lent

Luke 13:31-35

March 17, 2019

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE FOX AND THE HEN

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On Wednesday, my friend, Rev. Rick McDuffie, pastor of the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Fayetteville, posted something interesting on Facebook. It was a story from bbc.com with the title, “Chickens ‘gang up’ to kill intruder fox on French farm.” Apparently a young fox entered a coop on a school farm in northwest France and the automatic hatch door closed behind him, trapping him inside with 3,000 chickens. According to Pascal Daniel, head of farming at the agricultural school, “There was a herd instinct and they attacked him with their beaks. A whole mass of hens can arrive together and the fox may have panicked in the face of such a big number. They can be quite tenacious when they are in a pack.”¹

That strange story kind of puts a new twist on the old saying about the fox guarding the hen house. By the way, that saying dates to the 1580’s. Its earliest known use is found in a writing called *The Contre-League and Answere to Certain Letters Sent to the Maisters of Renes, by One of the League who Termeth Himselfe Lord of the Valley of Mayne, and Gentleman of the Late Duke of Guizes Trainee* — “He is a wolfe to keep the sheep, and a foxe to looke to the hennes.”²

The fox and the hen are characters in a number of fables and stories. Aesop told about the night Fox was prowling around the chicken-coop and saw Hen roosting up high in the rafters. Fox cried out, “Good news! Good news!” “What is it?” called down Hen. Fox said, “King Lion has declared a universal truce. No beast may hurt a bird henceforth, but all shall dwell together in friendship.” The Hen replied, “Why, that is good news, and I see someone coming with whom we can share the good news.” Hen then craned her neck and looked off into the distance. “What do you see?” asked Fox. Hen answered, “It is only my master’s Dog who is coming.” As soon as Fox heard about Dog, he turned away. Hen asked, “What, going so soon? Won’t you stay and share the good news of universal peace with Dog?” Fox called back over his shoulder, “I would gladly do so, but I fear Dog may not have heard of King Lion’s decree.” The moral of the story? Cunning often outwits itself.³

A variation of that story of Fox and Hen has the Fox feigning sympathy for Hen who has been sick for half a year. Fox pays Hen a visit in the chicken coop and finds her roosting high on her perch, out of his reach. Fox slyly tries to coax Hen to come down so he can check her pulse. “I thank you, sir, the hen replied, I’d rather on my roost abide; ’Tis true enough I’ve been unwell, And am so now, the truth to tell; And am so nervous, you must know, I dare not trust myself below, And therefore say to those who call, I see no company at all; For from my perch should I descend, I’m certain in

my death 'twould end; As then, I know, without presumption, My cough would end in a consumption.”⁴

How about one more? This is taken from *Baby's Own Aesop*, fables written in short verse by Walter Crane. Fox and Hen goes like this:

*The Hen roosted high on her perch;
Hungry Fox down below, on the search,
Coaxed her hard to descend.
She replied, “Most dear friend!
I feel more secure on my perch.”*

It seems Fox and Hen have been mortal enemies since the beginning. Today's strange little gospel story is no different. Jesus calls Herod Antipas “that fox” and then likens himself to a hen who gathers her brood under her wings. The glaring difference between Aesop's fable and Luke's story, however, is that in the first, Hen stays up on her perch where she feels more secure, while in the second, Jesus shows no fear of Herod's threat and goes right on with his ministry and journey to Jerusalem.

Herod Antipas is not the Herod of the Christmas story in Luke 2, but his son who became ruler of Galilee and Perea when his father died. John the Baptist preached against Herod Antipas for marrying his half-brother's wife, Herodias, who also happened to be Herod's niece. For that, John lost his head. Antipas also played a role in Jesus' trial. This is the Herod whom Jesus calls “that fox.”

In Aesop's fables and in our own American folklore, the fox is known as a sly creature. In Hebrew literature, the fox is more than sly — he is sinister, devious, and destructive. Jesus calling Herod a fox is not a compliment. To add insult to injury, Jesus doesn't refer to Herod as the Lion of Judah or the Eagle of Rome. He's just a cunning little fox. And, to top it off, Jesus doesn't run scared from the fox. In fact, he sends a message back to that sly old fox Herod, “Tell him I'm going to keep on doing what I've been doing, and I'm heading to Jerusalem.” Who knows the motive of the Pharisees' warning about Herod? Sincere? Laying a trap? Trying to get Jesus out of their hair? It doesn't really matter — Jesus tells that fox Herod, “I've got more important things to take care of down south in Jerusalem.”

Perhaps Rick's post on Facebook about the hens killing the fox was a coincidence this week. I replied, “Appropriate for the 3/17 lectionary text Luke 13:31-35 about Herod the fox and Jesus as the brooding hen! Of course, I guess Herod the fox and the other foxes ganged up and killed Jesus the brooding mother hen.”

As I was working on today's sermon, I read about the Church of Dominus Fleuit (“The Lord Wept”) church on the Mount of Olives in the Holy Land. The church is built on an ancient site, but dates from 1955. An Italian architect designed it as a tear-drop. From the church you can view the Dome of the Rock where the Temple once stood. The picture window, with its silhouette of a cross and chalice, overlooks the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

My brother, David, and his wife, Kathleen, just recently returned from a tour of the Holy Land. I texted him and asked him if they had visited the Church of Dominus

Flevit. He texted me some pictures they had taken at the church. Unfortunately, they didn't take any pictures of the mosaic on the altar. He did send me a picture from the Internet and said he could Photoshop Kathleen into the picture!

The mosaic on the altar is a picture of a mother hen with her wings spread wide, sheltering her little chicks. The mosaic recalls Jesus' words, "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, but you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34)

Why a hen? Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor asks that very question, and here is her reflection on the appropriate if not surprising choice:

"Given the number of animals available, it is curious that Jesus chooses a hen. Where is the biblical precedent for that? What about the mighty eagle of Exodus, or Hosea's stealthy leopard? What about 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. No wonder some of the chicks decided to go with the fox. 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."⁵

Since I moved to Duplin County, I have learned a lot about chickens. My dad used to tell me stories about visiting his grandmother on her farm in north Louisiana and helping take care of the chickens (even cutting their heads off so his grandma could fix dinner!). Now we have some chickens living in our neighborhood in Friendly Acres, but my association with them is restricted to trying not to hit them with my car.

Anyway, apparently a mother hen can be very protective of her little chicks, and even the chicks of another mother hen. She will cluck and call and gather them under her wings to shelter them from the rain and the cold. This week I read stories about firefighters finding the burned carcasses of mother hens with their surviving chicks safely under them.

So, it's tempting to focus on the lovely, comforting image of Jesus as the mother hen gathering her brood under her wings. But, in this Lenten story from Luke 13, Jesus contrasts his wishes ("How often have I desired to gather your children . . .") with the people's unwillingness to huddle under the shelter of his wings ("and you were not willing!") The heading for this story in my study Bible is "The Lament over Jerusalem." This is not the story about Jesus weeping over Jerusalem (we'll hear that story on Palm Sunday on April 14), but it's not hard to imagine Jesus' voice being choked with emotion for the little chicks who are running around, refusing to nestle under the outstretched wings of the mother hen, even when the sly foxes are on the prowl.

Jesus must still lament over us today, when we frantically run around (like chickens with their heads cut off?), scared of the fox or, more dangerous, taken in by the sly

foxes who are tempting us from the shelter of the Savior's wings. In her blog on this gospel story, which she calls "Why a Chicken?" Janet Hunt writes, "Jesus chooses the smart, self-sacrificing, chicken as his model. And you and I are those little chicks who seem bent on ignoring the efforts of the one who would save us from all that would threaten. And that is where the image finally comes home. We enter this story as that brood of chicks who are scattered, distracted, unable, somehow, to comprehend the very real danger which is threatening. Jesus' lament over Jerusalem is also over you and me and his world which all too often still refuses the gifts Jesus would so freely give, when all it would take for us to survive the attack of the fox would be for us to stand still and stand nearby. So we gather in this season of Lent, knowing fully our need for repentance. And it would appear that our primary sin is what it has always been: our unwillingness to stand still in the presence of God: to simply submit to and receive and live into all the gifts God intends for us. . . . I wonder what it would be like, how it might all change if I just take that first step and pause within this understanding and ask God to give me what it takes to simply stand still within his sacrificial protection, in his tender care."⁶

As we travel through this Lenten season with Jesus in the gospel of Luke, we will encounter sly foxes and many dangers. But, instead of staying high up on the perch in the safety of the chicken coop, Jesus heads to Jerusalem, "the city that kills the prophets and stones this who are sent to it!" And, as strange as it sounds, Jesus calls us to follow him, right into the fox's den. And, know this, Jesus wants to gather us children of God together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.

Jesus wants so much to do this that he stretched his arms out on the cross that we might find shelter under his wings.

Let us pray: Lord our God, blessed is the one who comes in your name! Gather us in your gentle presence as a hen shelters her brood beneath her wings. Finish the work you have begun in us so that we may show your glory; through Jesus Christ our peace. Amen.

NOTES

¹13 March 2019, "Chickens 'gang up' to kill intruder fox on French farm," at www.bbc.com.

² @ www.grammarist.com.

³ "The Fox, the Hen, and the Dog," at www.yankeeweb.net.

⁴ Jefferys Taylor at www.fablesfaesop.com.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, "As a Hen Gathers Her Brood," *The Christian Century*, February 25, 1998, p. 201.

⁶ Janet H. Hunt, "Why a Chicken?" Luke 13:31-35, February 18, 2013 at www.words.dancingwiththeword.com.