

LIKE A MOTHER HEN—Luke 13:31-35

People who followed Jesus in the years after his life and death were focused on communicating a message with two basic thrusts~

First—Jesus' own message and teachings! The faith **of** Jesus!

Second!— a message **about** Jesus! His life and deeds of power.

Within 50 years of his death on the cross—three gospels emerged:

Mark, Matthew and Luke.

Mark came first, around the year 70—during a terrible war in which more than two million Jews were killed by the Romans.

Matthew came next, maybe 15 years later.

Luke the 3rd, 20 years later.

By analyzing the text, Bible scholars concluded that the Gospel of Luke drew heavily upon the Gospel of Mark for its narrative.

Scholars also believe that Matthew and Luke drew on an oral tradition known as Q—the SOURCE—thought to be the earliest transmission of actual sayings and teachings of Jesus.

In fact, today's passage, which is found in both Luke and Matthew, is considered to be one of these original oral sayings of Jesus, part of Q, the Source.

The three gospels were written to communicate Jesus' message to different Jesus-following communities in Turkey and Greece. They were read during worship services and especially as a prelude to a communion service.

The three gospels' view of who Jesus was **varies**—and these variations add richness to our understanding of Jesus 2000 years later.

For example—**Mark's Jesus** is an enigmatic and tragic person, misunderstood and abandoned. Being a follower of Jesus means taking up your cross and following him.

No resurrection is reported!

A brave and selfless martyr stands out from Mark's pages.

He acts with urgency!

“And immediately” is a big phrase in Mark.

Call Mark the wartime gospel!

Come over to **Matthew's Jesus!** Jesus is a Moses like figure, who teaches with authority and wisdom. Think of the Sermon on the Mount. Think the Beatitudes. Think lilies of the field and birds of the air!

The Jesus of Luke—which is the gospel for this year's Lent—is a compassionate figure!

A friend to outcasts!

He is especially sympathetic to women's concerns!

Someone who has come to save people who are lost!

Think the Parable of the Prodigal! The Lost Sheep! The woman seeking her lost coin.

It's not surprising that in today's lectionary reading from Luke's gospel, we find a feminine image for God, in the passage about the hen—**and** “that fox”—Herod.

One more item before we turn to the text. When **Luke's gospel** was finally written down, it was meant to appeal to a more educated, Greek speaking community along the Mediterranean Sea, far beyond Jerusalem and ancient Palestine.

Thus, Luke's gospel is written in a form of an ancient biography and has parallels with other biographies of great people in the ancient world.

For instance—Luke has a prologue that establishes the qualifications and reliability of the author.

Scenes from the hero's youth are described—in this case, Jesus' youth—in which assertions are made along the lines of, *“Oh, see, even as a child, and as a teenager, we could already see signs of his future greatness.”*

Thus in Luke, we have the famous story of Jesus encountering the scholars and teachers in the temple in Jerusalem and demonstrating his early won wisdom.

Now to today's story!— which might be titled, like an early American folk song— *“The Fox and the Hen”*

The first lesson the story teaches us is that Jesus is like a protecting mother, ready to give her life for the chicks.

How often have I desired to gather your children together, “Jesus says to Jerusalem, “as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.

In other words, in a dangerous situation, with a fox on the loose—and the baby chickens are vulnerable, all the mother can do is gather her chicks under her wings and hope to fend the fox off as best she can.

Jesus is like that.

Jesus is ready to give his life just to protect those whom the fox would destroy.

Sometimes in our lives—we are unable to protect people we care about. Either because of impossible circumstances they are in—or poor choices they have made—or because of illness or injury or pain they are in—losses they are suffering—there is little we can do but open our arms to them—wrap our arms around them— and hold them.

But we can do that!

We can open our arms and invite them in to be held.

To be hugged.

To be told: *“I love you.”*

It's interesting— isn't it?—that Jesus chooses a mother hen as a metaphor for himself.

Not an eagle.

Not a lion.

A mother hen!—who wraps her wings around her chicks and protects them even if it makes her more vulnerable to the fox's attacks.

So we have a feminine image of God.

A mothering God to go along with the more prevalent fathering God images.

And a very humble image—this hen!

The text also teaches us to avoid stereotyping in religious affairs.

In this story, the Pharisees come off quite well. Some of them warn Jesus that Herod—that fox!—has plans to do harm to Jesus.

Typically, in the New Testament, Pharisees are opponents of Jesus. And the word Pharisee has come down to our time as a word with a negative quality. A Pharisee is seen as someone who is smug, narrow minded, concerned with the minutiae and the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law.

Pharisees are seen as hypocrites.

Not here though.

The Pharisees are the ones who warn Jesus that a predator fox is nearby.

Now Pharisees did have a tendency to become legalistic!

Nevertheless, they were committed to Hebrew Scriptures and sought ways to live by the biblical commandments.

If anything, Pharisees were very firm in their opposition to Roman domination of Israel, and they were very much opposed to a Roman puppet like Herod who had converted to Judaism only to make himself a more acceptable choice as the Roman appointed ruler of Israel and its capital city.

In fact, there are instances in the New Testament where Jesus agrees with the Pharisees on accepting and even encouraging oral interpretations of the Torah, rather than strict, literal, written interpretations.

Anytime we find Jesus saying, “*You have heard it said, but I say to you*”, he is offering an oral interpretation of the law, or “the instruction”—Torah—, and oral interpretation was dear to the Pharisees and really paved the way for modern Judaism which identifies itself very much as “An Interpretative Faith”.

I think we modern Christians could take a page out of the Pharisees’ book so to speak and steer our faith more toward becoming “An Interpretative Faith”.

All in all, the passage presents good reason to stay clear of religious stereotyping. Maybe when we are tempted to mutter something like:

Those Baptists!

Or those Catholics!

Or Those Muslims!

Or Those Jews!

Or Those Presbyterians!

Instead we ought to take a moment and think of a positive quality in whatever religion it is—or even just a single person who represents those faiths in a way that is helpful to you. Even admirable!

And so, this is another lesson for me in religious stereotyping. We need to be very careful about it—and while we are at it—even be careful about stereotyping people who are not religious at all.

If anything, considering the very opposite of what we think, is good for us. It’s a good thing to study and consider and examine what might even be considered to be heresy—for the simple reason that even if we ultimately reject it—we are learning to open our minds and ask questions and expand the possibilities there are for us to create spiritual solutions to the problems and predicaments in our lives.

Having said all of this, it's important, finally, to note that this section of Luke is read during Lent for the very reason that it is a Lament!

It's a Lament over a tragic situation in which a whole host of people—for many different reasons—are unable to save a certain situation.

Jesus especially is unable to save the situation.

All he can do is Lament! Jerusalem is in the hands of a conqueror—Herod—with lamentable consequences—the crucifixion of Jesus—persecution of his followers and eventually the destruction of Jerusalem itself.

No wonder the Pharisees called Herod “That fox”! Herod was a predatory ruler!

I wonder though about this idea of the prophets being killed and stoned in Jerusalem. The greatest of the prophets that come to mind —Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Nathan, Deborah, Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea, Nahum, Joel and others—were not killed or stoned in Jerusalem or by Jerusalem.

The very worst persecutor of prophets in the Old Testament was a non-Jewish monarchy led by Ahab and Jezebel.

They persecuted Elijah and other prophets for being faithful Jews, which Ahab and Jezebel most certainly were not. Perhaps Jesus is referring to John the Baptist.

Or perhaps the text is referring to the many tyrannies and wars that mark Jerusalem's history across the centuries. Where there are constant wars, it is difficult for matters of reasoned and compassionate faith to prevail in people's minds—beyond their prayers or apocalyptic hopes about a realm of God's love beyond the present turmoil. In any case, it was a dark time, and living conditions and spiritual conditions had deteriorated—and Jesus and his followers sensed their own vulnerability—and so he speaks out against those who run the city.

And he laments the fate of those whose lives have been reduced in quality because of indifference, negligence, stupidity and outright hostility among those who run the holy city—the kind of city that would try to silence anyone who was persistently critical—the kind of city that would kill and stone prophets. That kind of city leads to

the existence of lamentable situations. So Jesus responds to the lamentable situation with his own lament: *“O Jerusalem, How often I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.*

We have clear reason to lament in our city right now—the lack of affordable housing for more and more people. Poor and working people, middle class people, the homeless...the situation is becoming worse and worse. People with good jobs can barely afford to buy a home or rent an expensive apartment.

And people on fixed incomes and in minimum and low wage jobs are in desperation.

Just one section of the problem was apparent to Stan Morgan and I as we drove through neighborhoods from 35th to 43rd street east or Prospect the other day. An island of new housing here and there, but mostly deteriorated homes, often owned by absentee landlords, nearly anonymous companies operating outside the United States.

It’s our Lenten Lament in our city.

And if we want to know what Jesus might have been lamenting—even though it was different— think of the lament our city is experiencing over this housing crisis.

We must demand that those who are running for mayor and city council present specific, tangible solutions to this crisis.

I’m sure what Jesus was lamenting in his day was as bad and probably consistently worse—since more people—almost all of them being poor—were even more vulnerable—back then—to the difficult, even harsh day to day conditions of life.....

And so Jesus is saying—what we can do in the face of a fox—what we can do in the face of a lamentable situation or circumstance in life— is—You be a mother hen—open your arms wide....

.....and invite them in.

Amen.

Rev. Scott Myers, Lenten sermon, March 24, 2019