

Mother Church
Psalm 27, Matthew 13:31-35
First Presbyterian Church
March 17, 2019

Introduction to the Psalm Reading

The season of Lent can be a foray into the soul...
 offering us the time to look deep within
 so that we might identify and name
 the dark realities that are within us.
 Among such realities are our fears.
Though what we fear may be different for each of us,
 the fact that we DO HAVE FEARS
 is something we have in common
 with each other and with our forbearers in faith.
However, as people of faith
 we acknowledge our fears of the uncertainties of life
 from a place of faith...
we fear many things, yes...
 but we also trust God's promises to us
 and so place our hope in God.
The poet who penned Psalm 27
 is keenly aware of both of these realities:
 fear and faith... uncertainty and confidence.
This morning we use his words to do the same.

Psalm 27

- L: 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?
- P: When evildoers assail me, uttering slanders against me,
my adversaries and foes, they shall stumble and fall.
Though a host encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;
though war arise against me, yet I will be confident.**
- L: One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after;
 that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the
 beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.
- P: For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent,
he will set me high upon a rock.**
- L: And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies round about me; and I will
 offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the
 LORD.

**P: Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!
Thou hast said, "Seek ye my face."
My heart says to thee, "Thy face, LORD, do I seek."
Hide not thy face from me. Teach me thy way, O LORD;
and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.**

L: I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living!

**P: Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yea, wait for the
LORD!**

Luke 13:31-35

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." 32He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. 33Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' 34Jerusalem, 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! 35See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Sermon

On the western slope of the Mount of Olives...
looking out over the Kidron Valley at the Old City of Jerusalem...
there is a small chapel known as Dominus Flevit –
that is Latin for "the Lord wept."¹

The name comes from Luke's Gospel
which contains not one, but two accounts of Jesus' grief
over the loss of Jerusalem.

According to tradition,
this teardrop-shaped chapel is built on the spot
where Jesus paused that day and wept over the city
that had rejected him.

The wall behind the chapel's altar
contains a high-arched window
that looks out over the Old City.
Iron grillwork divides the view into sections,
so that on sunny days
the effect is almost like a stained-glass window.

¹ I remember this chapel from my first visit to the Holy Land. The description draws on Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon, "Chickens and Foxes," Bread of Angels (Cowley, 1997), p. 123-124.

Only the subject of this window is alive...

it's not some artist's rendering...

it is the city itself

with the Dome of the Rock in the lower left corner

and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the middle.

It is a spectacular view...

yet what is equally memorable

is what is on the front of the altar inside the chapel.

It is a bright and colorful mosaic

picturing a white hen with a golden halo around her head.

Her red comb resembles a crown...

and her wings are spread wide

to shelter the pale little chicks under them.

There are seven of them –

chicks with black dots for eyes and orange specks for beaks -

they look happy to be there.

And yet, if you look more closely

you see that this is no ordinary hen...

but a fierce looking bird with her breast fluffed up

with eyes that look ready to spit fire

on anyone who dares come near her babies.

No ordinary mother hen at all!

I think I know why the artist took liberties with the text

and created this "rooster-like" figure –

It's simple, really - a rooster can defend himself.

He has sharp spikes on the back of his feet

which work like little stilettos

on anyone who dares bother him...

and apparently a rooster can peck pretty hard

and doesn't wait for you to peck first.

Yet, Jesus didn't say he was like a rooster.

He said he was like a brooding hen

whose chief purpose in life...

(whose sole reason for existence)

is to protect her young

with nothing much in the way of a beak

and nothing at all in the way of talons.

About all she can do is fluff out her breast

and gather her chicks under her wings...

putting herself between her "young-uns" and the fox

hoping that her body

will be enough to satisfy his appetite

so he will leave her babies alone.

Well, how do you like that image of Jesus –
 a mother hen who gathers her chicks under her wings?
Given the number of animals available,
 it seems curious that the Lord chooses a hen.
What about the mighty eagle of Exodus?
 Or Hosea's stealthy leopard?
What about the proud lion of Judah,
 mowing down his enemies with his roar?
Compared to those,
 a mother hen does not inspire much confidence, does she?²
Because when the foxes of this world
 start prowling around your home...
when I can hear them
 breathing just outside my door...
then it would be nice to have a larger defense budget
 for the hen house.

I don't know about you,
 but I'm pretty much a sucker
 for a good Clint Eastwood movie...
 and especially one in which Eastwood plays a preacher.
In the film, Pale Rider,
 he plays a frontier preacher with some kind of past.
Just what kind of past is a mystery...
 but what we know is he walks around in a clerical collar
 with a deeply pained expression on his face...
 and that once, when he took his shirt off
 you could see the scars of three old bullet holes in his back.

Well, one day this preacher with a past
 rides into a mining town that has been overrun with foxes.
The sheriff is in the pocket of the bad guys
 who are taking whatever they want
 and killing anyone who gets in their way.
And at first, Clint "the preacher" just takes it all in –
 as if he's getting real clear on who the foxes are
 and where they are hiding out.

Then one day when the time is right...
 he walks into the bank
 and produces a key to a safe deposit box...
 in that very town, no less!

² Barbara Brown Taylor, "As a hen gathers her brood," Christian Century, February 25, 1998, p.201

And when he is alone in the vault,
 he pulls the box from the wall and opens the lid.
Being Clint Eastwood, you have an idea what's inside -
 a pair of six shooters and a belt full of bullets.
Eastwood takes the gun belt out of the box
 and carefully straps it around his waist.
He fills the cylinders with bullets
 and puts the guns in their holster.
Then... then, he takes off his clerical collar
 and puts it in the box.
By now I'm about to come out of my seat...
 because after seeing all that the foxes
 had done to the people of the town...
I was all but screaming, "Yes!! Yes!!"
 You go get 'em, Clint! Go get them foxes!"
Which, to my great satisfaction, is precisely what he did.
 It was clearly not my finest hour!

Well, that was Clint Eastwood... and this was Jesus.
 Jesus also bore scars on his body.
 Jesus also meant to protect the chicks from the foxes.
But that's where the similarities ended.
 Jesus would not become a fox himself
 in order to do it...
 he would not fight fire with fire.
When Herod and his bullies came after him,
 he would not run from them...
 but neither would he produce any six shooters
 to stop them in their tracks.
He simply put himself between them and his brood...
 all fluffed up and hunkered down like a mother hen.

So, I was thinking:
 what if Jesus means for the church
 to be like that mother hen?
If WE are the body of Christ...
 what if one image we might embrace
 is of a big, fluffed up brooding hen...
 wings spread wide...
 offering shelter and warmth to all kinds of chicks?

I read a sermon this week
 by the pastor of Idlewilde Presbyterian Church in Memphis.
Steven Montgomery was recalling the time,

a little more than 50 years ago,
when Christians in Memphis
were locking arms around their churches
to create a barrier for people of color
who would come to worship.

Just picture that from above –
hundreds of Christians locking arms in a circle around a church
to keep certain people out.
Sometimes the foxes are on the church roll!

And then, I think of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem...
and of the very different image of the church as a mother hen.
Her wings spread wide in welcome...
inviting all who would,
to come and be gathered into his brood.
Rather than creating a barrier to keep folks out,
opening wide the doors to all who would come in.

Fortunately, there were a few people of faith in Memphis
that were convicted otherwise...
folks who saw the church very differently.
There was a rabbi, an Episcopal bishop, a Methodist minister,
and a few others including, Paul Tudor Jones,
Idlewild's pastor at the time.
In a sermon one Sunday morning,
amidst the cacophony of voices urging him otherwise,
he stood in Idlewild's pulpit
and said clearly and unequivocally:
"This is not my church, but it is not your church either.
It is God's church, and any child of God, regardless of color,
can worship here."
Regretfully... just as the religious leaders in Jerusalem
refused Jesus' invitation,
so did the some 500 souls of Idlewilde Presbyterian Church
who withdrew their membership the next week.³

To those who were there that day,
this little dust up between Herod and Jesus
might have looked like nothing more than a minor skirmish.
But that contest between the chicken and the fox
turned out to be a battle of cosmic proportions.
pitting the power of tooth and fang... six shooters and bullets...

³ Stephen Montgomery, "The One Big Thing," a sermon preached on Day1.org, March 17, 2019

against the power of a mother's love for her chicks...
and as we know, God's money was on the hen.

She won, of course!

It didn't look that way at first...
with feathers all over the place
and her chicks running here and there for cover.

But as time went on,

it became clear what she had done.

She had refused to run from the foxes...

AND she had refused to become one of them.

She had bravely held her ground to protect her chicks....

AND she had bravely offered herself to do it.

She died a mother hen,

and in three days she came back with scars on her body
to make sure her brood knew that the power of foxes
could not kill her love for them...
nor could it steal her away from them.

Who would have thought being a mother hen

required so much strength... so much courage?

But maybe that's why through the ages

the church has been called "Mother Church."

It is where we come to be fed and sheltered...

it's where we grow from chicks into chickens...

it's where we teach others what we ourselves have learned...

it's where give to others what we ourselves have received...

but most of all, it's where we love others

just the way we ourselves have been loved.

Loved... by a mother hen

who would give his life to gather us under his wings.⁴

⁴ Taylor, Chickens and Foxes, p. 127