

Sermon: Luke 13: 31-35 (Lent 2C)
Christ Church Riverdale, 11 March 2010
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Luke 13:31 - 14:1 ³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." ³² He 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. ³³ Yet 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.' ³⁴ 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! ³⁵ See, 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.'"

It's not often that we see the Pharisees trying to help Jesus: "Get away from here," they say, "for Herod wants to kill you." Maybe they were trying to get Jesus to move along, or maybe they were afraid of what Herod might do to their village if he thought they were harboring Jesus. But not all Pharisees were opposed to the message of Jesus, so maybe they were just trying to keep him safe. But Jesus doesn't choose the safe route: "Go and tell that fox that I'm not running away." Jesus has nothing to lose because he isn't afraid to die, he's on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem, where *expects* to die.

Herod had to be a fox to keep his position of ruler. He was part of a local dynasty and he got to have some of the trappings of power, but he was really a puppet of the Roman Empire. In order to hold onto his position he had to do not what was in his own people's interests, but what Rome wanted, yet at the same time keep the locals happy enough not to revolt. Jesus called him a fox; we might call him a weasel. In this climate, it helped to be sly, clever, and ruthless. Foxes are predators; so was Herod.

Jesus, on the other hand, thinks of himself as a very different animal; he yearns to act as a mother hen. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" he says. "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing." And you were not willing. Jerusalem was and is such a mixture of the best and highest humanity is called to, and self-interested fighting among the groups who consider it holy. At the same time Jerusalem was the city where God's people gather, where God's revelation and blessing can be seen & felt, Jerusalem had become a city that would rather kill the truth than listen to it and take it to heart. Jerusalem today still simmers with hostility and repressed violence. There's a church on the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem called Dominus Flevit--"The Lord Wept." The church has a large clear window behind the altar where you can see the city of Jerusalem, and the altar itself has a mosaic of a hen gathering her chicks. Hanging from the lectern is a cloth that says the same thing in 3 languages: *Salaam. Shalom. Peace.*

Jesus throws in his lot not with the predators--the foxes--the ones who can look after themselves in a threatening environment, but with the prey. Chicken eyes are toward the sides of their heads so that they can watch out all around for predators . . . like foxes. A hen gathering up her brood under her wings is a beautiful image of comfort--of the chicks snuggling up for warmth as they fall asleep. But more than just comfort, a mother hen gathers her brood for protection. She gets between her young and danger, like Secret Service agents are supposed to take a bullet for the president, and in shielding her young, the hen offers herself to the predator in their place.

A country firefighter tells the story of a burning barn that they couldn't save. After the fire, he was walking around through the remains and heard the normal hissing of wet embers. But he also heard sounds of life. Those sounds were coming from the burned corpse of a hen. Underneath their mother's body, the chicks were still alive.¹ This how Christ loves us, and yet so often we are not willing! Why not? Sometimes we think we don't need it, and other times we think we don't deserve it. Still Christ's arms remain open wide.

Sacrificial protection isn't just a gift we receive for our own sake. If Jesus yearned to gather and to protect people with his own body while he was on earth, who has that job now? Are we the Body of Herod? No, the church is the Body of Christ. In the news we see examples: a few days ago the young woman killed by an oncoming car as she pushed her friend out of the way. A few years ago Wesley Autrey laid down on top of a young man who had fallen on the subway tracks to push him below an oncoming train (they both survived). Not all of us will have the opportunity to protect someone else in such dramatic ways, but we will have opportunities. Maybe we take the heat at work by speaking up when there's an ethically questionable situation and nobody else is rocking the boat. Maybe we're in a social situation and refuse to go along with a prejudice that people share widely. Whatever the situation, we don't have to be afraid, because Jesus protects us sacrificially like a mother hen so that we can go and do likewise.

1 Susan R. Andrews, "Are you a fox or a hen?" *Lectionary Homiletics* 12/4 (March 2001), 15.