

Under God's Wing

Sermon 136 | Greystone Baptist Church | March 13, 2022

Luke 13:31-35

It is a strange thing to imagine God as a mother hen. It has long been one of my favorite images of God given in the Bible. I know Pastor April loves it too!

One of the reasons I love it so much is because of how easily we forget it. Even the most well-read Christian who can quote scripture in their sleep can overlook this important little reference in Luke's Gospel – a rare example of Jesus comparing himself to a bird, and not just any bird, a female chicken.

Of all the available options, why would Jesus choose such a lowly and humble creature? Why not a majestic hawk or eagle? Why not a peaceful dove like the one we remember descending from the heavens at the baptism? Why not a fairy wren or gold finch, a cardinal or bluebird? Why not a raven or spider catcher? Those would have made interesting metaphors wouldn't they? But Jesus didn't liken himself to any of these more dazzling or powerful birds. Nope, Jesus opted for a hen.

I have often wondered why this section of Luke's Gospel didn't make it to the stained glass windows of Europe's famous cathedrals. Why weren't the chickens displayed as gargoyles to fend off evil spirits and protect those who claimed sanctuary within their walls? If the metaphor is good enough for Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, why isn't it good enough for us?

In her book, *Consider the Birds*, author and pastor Debbie Blue writes, "It's a loving image but it's not especially dignified. The chicken is not a magnificent bird – it is the most domesticated animal there is. A hen is a fussy old woman [...] in an apron pickling cucumbers. Chicken is what you find wrapped in Styrofoam, wrapped in plastic in the meat department at the grocery store."^[1]

Maybe this is why we have often chosen other images for our spiritual reflection? She does have a point about chickens. For, well, forever we have been domesticating, raising, caging, free-ranging, packaging, selling, and eating chickens. Even Pliny the Elder, a Roman author and philosopher wrote on the domestication and production of chickens in the first century!

In case you're interested in 1st century poultry philosophy: Pliny felt that hens should not be kept in small cages but should be free to roam around, insisting that "Nature had allowed the wide air for their scope and habitation..." So even in Jesus' world, to be compared to a chicken was to be far from extraordinary. It does make good sense, therefore, that "in Christian art, Jesus is represented more often as a lion or an eagle than a hen, even though he himself gives us the image: Jesus as chicken."^[2]

We like to think of Jesus as the earthly extension of God almighty and that word – almighty – doesn't exactly make sense as a mother hen... Rather, it evokes images of power, strength, masculinity, and dominance. Could it be that we have missed something? Is there more here, more to learn about the ways that God chooses to intervene and act in this world? Could it be that Jesus "sought to upend our notions of power?"^[3]

Let's take another look at the Gospel reading for today...

As Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem, he teaches and heals along the way. The disciples are traveling with him and soaking up every ounce of wisdom that they can. Before they arrive in Jerusalem, some Pharisees approach with a word of warning: *Turn away, they warned, Herod wants to kill you.*

We shouldn't jump to conclusions here about the Pharisees' motives. Sure, it's possible that they were just trying to scare Jesus, passing along an unsubstantiated claim about Herod's cruel intentions. This would fit into our negative stereotypes about them and the antagonistic role they often play in the Gospel narratives.

But, then again, considering Herod... He did have blood on his hands – he had murdered before and who's to say he wouldn't do it again. We know that Herod is the ultimate bully. So isn't it believable that these Pharisees may really be looking out for Jesus? Well, no matter the answer to that question, Jesus is unshaken, unafraid, and undeterred. *You tell that fox for me, I'm healing these people and I'm going to keep on doing it.*

To be clear, even in the ancient world, to call someone a fox was not a compliment.

You may know the old idiom, "Like a fox guarding the henhouse." The fox might impress and inspire confidence with showy displays of power and intelligence, but the fox is always looking out for himself. Put a fox in charge of the henhouse and you won't have to worry with other predators... the fox will enjoy the feast himself.

In Jesus' world, the fox was a Jewish rabbinical term of derision for someone who was known to be habitually deceptive and cunning. Someone who could not be trusted, one who was a crafty, ruthless, and vicious animal. The fox is not your friend. *Go and tell that fox...* Jesus says back to the Pharisees.

Herod enjoyed the appearance of power. After inheriting part of his father's land, he was officially the "Tetrarch of Galilee" which positioned him well within the political hierarchy of the Roman Empire. He had some power and lots of connections, but as we saw with the whole John the Baptist saga, and as we will see when Pilate comes to him for assistance with Jesus' arrest later on in this Gospel... Herod is not interested in wielding his power – and certainly not to protect anyone else. He prefers to play in the sidelines where his wealth and comfort accrue while others bear the burden and the responsibility of governing.

Maybe Jesus was angry about the fate of his friend. Maybe Jesus really did believe that Herod was out to get him. With these details left out of Luke's account we are left with so many questions. But what is remarkable and very clear in the Gospel is the almost antagonistic power struggle unfolding between these two opposites.

- Between Herod, Tetrarch of Galilee
- and Jesus, Prince of Peace

As the story has been unfolding up to this point, we are well aware that the messiah is going to be a different kind of king. One that brings peace and not a sword, one that rules with justice and righteousness, not greed and self-preservation. But have we considered that this "different kind of messiah" might also challenge our whole understanding of what power is?

Up to this point power meant political and social advantage. Up to this point power meant safety and protection from anything that threatened one's life and livelihood. Up to this point power was the only path to survival. And up to this point, survival was the ultimate goal. But here, Jesus calls all of that into question.

You tell that fox... Jesus says.

Then he shifts his attention to the city where Herod rules and resides. A city where prophets have been killed while the people stood by without intervention. It is a haunting omen for those – like us – who read this story with the end already on our minds.

We know what will happen to Jesus in Jerusalem. There, he will join the ranks of the murdered prophets, while the people stand by and watch without intervention. Even still, Jesus mourns for the city and her inhabitants.

How often I have desired to gather your children together...

Knowing they will watch him die. Knowing they will do nothing to stop it. Knowing all of this Jesus says those motherly-love-filled words: *How often I have desired to gather your children together, like a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings... and you were not willing.* In the face of great worldly power, power that was backed by the Roman army itself, Jesus's power chooses a vulnerable and maternal posture.

What's that? You want to kill me?

Ok, let me spread out my arms and shield these little ones from your violence. Let me gather them in close so that they are not harmed by the coldness that surrounds and threatens their lives. Let me protect them, and put myself on the line instead.

Go ahead... do your thing. I am going to keep on doing mine.

Just 10 days ago, on March 3rd, a photojournalist by the name of Francesco Malavolta captured an image that has now gone viral.

Seven strollers line a platform at a train station that connects Ukraine to Poland. It had become a necessary route of escape for Ukrainian mothers and children attempting to flee the violence of war.

Though the photograph only shows seven, Malavolta contends that there were many, many more outside the frame.^[4] ...and they kept on coming. The picture quickly became an inspiration for others to do the same, soon new photographs filled with strollers lined up along the streets in border towns as arms of a mother hen stretching out, gathering the brood under her wings. It was and continues to be a chilling example of motherly love in response to war and violence.

It is a contemporary embodiment of Jesus' words:

You tell that fox, I am going to keep on...

This is just one example, and I am certain there are many... Examples of selfless and sometimes even self-sacrificing love that boldly interrupts the violence that power so often demands. And as love interrupts, another kind of power emerges, one that says:

*You tell that fox to go ahead, to keep on pushing,
to keep on threatening, to keep on killing...
but we won't stop standing strong in the way of love,
we won't stop spreading out our wings,
we won't stop gathering the beloved in
like a mother hen protecting her brood.*

Maybe we did miss something all those times we read Luke's Gospel and glossed right over the whole "Jesus as mother hen" reference. Maybe our inclination toward the all-powerful, almighty expressions of God prevented us from seeing the incarnate God who struggles and suffers alongside us and who is always ready to stretch out her wings and gather us in.

Moltmann: "If Christ is weak and humble on earth, then God is weak and humble in heaven." (blue, 2139)

[1] Debbie Blue. *Consider the Birds*, kindle version. loc 1962.

[2] *Ibid.* loc 2124

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] <https://www.newsweek.com/ukraine-poland-train-station-photo-francesco-malavolta-strollers-twitter-1686437>