

SERMON “Mother Hen, An Ordinary and Powerful Image”

OLIVET CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC

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Luke 13: 31-35

The Lament over Jerusalem

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 away from 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.” ’

SERMON Mother Hen, An Ordinary and Powerful Image

Somehow, I don’t think that if I were to ask you to close your eyes and think of an image of Jesus, that a hen would come to mind.

Maybe you would think of a shepherd with a lamb over his shoulders, a man preaching to crowds, a man walking on water, a man kneeling in prayer in a garden or sitting with children climbing over him, a man lifting up bread at dinner or maybe Jesus on a cross or ascending to heaven. Or maybe you are the type of person who likes to think in more abstract images and might think of a vine with branches coming from it or a beautiful light surrounding the world coming from Jesus’ “I am” statements. There so many possibilities and they can all be inspiring.

But a mother hen?

Yet that is the image Jesus uses for himself in this morning’s scripture. Jesus laments that Jerusalem – a metaphor for God’s people – has drifted away from God. He wants to gather his

people “as a hen gathers her brood under her wings”. But God’s people had not been willing to be gathered. They kept drifting away from the God of love and justice.

Now there are readings from Hebrew Scripture with pleas to God to hold people under the protection of God’s wings –

From the Book of Ruth, “May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!” (Ruth 2:12)

From the Psalms, “Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by.” (Psalm 57:1)

And from Psalm 61, “Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer...

Let me abide in your tent forever, find refuge under the shelter of your wings. (Psalm 61:4)

In these readings and others, asking to be held close, to be sheltered, and to be protected under God’s wings, is a common plea to God. But I don’t know that the psalmist or those who prayed or sang these psalms would have envisioned a mother hen when calling to God.

Yet, in this morning’s passage from Luke, it’s exactly what Jesus did. Jesus chose a hen. He did not choose a bird of prey. He did not choose a bird that was thought of as regal or majestic or that symbolized power - like an eagle. He did not choose a bird that built its nest in tops of trees or on cliffs away from people. Jesus, the Messiah, our God become human, chose a mother hen; a domesticated, female bird that people would have had in their yards and was common to their everyday lives, as the bird that would gather her little chicks who have wandered away.

Now I have never been gathered under the wings of a hen. But if I think about it, I imagine there is warmth and softness. I imagine that if there were other chicks, so there would be a feeling of closeness and togetherness. And I imagine there would be a feeling of being protected, safe, and even loved.

I can also imagine a mother hen squawking and pecking at an intruder. She would protect her chicks. But somehow I do not see a mother hen as being able to fight off all intruders – especially a fox.

Jesus had just called Herod a fox. Foxes are cunning and sly, they prey on chickens. Jesus knew that. So calling Herod a fox, fit the scenario he created. Jesus knew the kind of man that Herod was. Herod had John the Baptist beheaded. And Herod saw Jesus as a threat to Roman rule.

Jesus’ teachings would turn society on its head. And with all the people who were interested in following this radical teacher, Jesus was a threat to Roman rule. Herod would want Jesus out of the picture. Jesus understood that. So Jesus is aware of his future, what was in store for him

in Jerusalem. But no one would prevent him from sharing his message of love and liberation as he made his way there.

Jesus told the Pharisees, who were warning him that his life was in danger, to let that fox, Herod, know that he would continue his ministry as he headed to Jerusalem. Despite Herod's power and desire to eliminate him, he was on his way to Jerusalem. Regardless of what was in store for him, Jesus was going there. And Jesus knew what awaited him in Jerusalem, he knew the fate of prophets – that many of them were killed in Jerusalem. Jesus knew he was on his way to Jerusalem to face his death. But nothing was going to stand in the way of his living his mission based on love. Along the way he would continue his acts of healing and love and his preaching about justice and radical, liberating love.

In this passage, Jesus was foretelling his fate and that he would not be detoured from his journey. But in his words, we also hear his love and longing for his people. He is lamenting that he has been rejected by God's people, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you were not willing!" His sadness is that his message of love, his desire for people to come into his love and live in his love has not been accepted.

Jesus, the mother hen, wanted to draw her chicks near because she loved them and wanted them close. He wanted them to come together under his wings. We worship Jesus, our Savior, who chose the metaphor of a mother hen to describe himself. He used a common and ordinary bird. Jesus knew that people can relate to what they know. There is power in the familiar and the ordinary. Yes, there is power in the ordinary and the familiar, when there is love and love is shared. Our God is in the ordinary.

Over the past few weeks, we have seen images coming from Ukraine, images of ordinary acts done in love – one young child playing with a small car and another holding a teddy bear- given to them by strangers; local people making and serving meals to refugees; people opening their homes - inviting women and children who are complete strangers to stay with them; mall owners converting their buildings to shelters; dairy owners giving away milk; one woman playing a piano and another playing a violin in public to struggling people walking by, and groups of people in prayer. Ordinary people are offering ordinary things that take on extraordinary meaning because they are done during this time of war. Ordinary people are offering ordinary things – food, shelter, welcome, comfort, hope - that become acts of great compassion because they are done in love.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to love and to demonstrate that love with acts of kindness, compassion and justice. During Lent we are called to fasting, almsgiving and prayer. Whether we are making sacrifices by paying higher prices for gas knowing that we are supporting the people of Ukraine, whether we are donating to organizations that support these people, whether we are praying for the safety of strangers and an end to this war or maybe we are supporting others who struggle locally or in a distant land through ordinary acts of making donations to organizations who support the hungry, the homeless, or those who are struggling

due to prejudice, or we are preparing hygiene kits that can be used where ever they are needed. And we pray- on our own and with others. Then we become like a mother hen.

Like a simple, commonplace, ordinary hen that is familiar to us and lives among us, we can spread our wings and invite others to come under them – offering compassion, comfort, protection, and love. When we do so, we are sharing the love of Jesus; our God, the Messiah, our Savior, our mother hen. Let it be so.