

“The Fox and The Hen”
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Psalm 27

Luke 13:31-35

If I asked for alternate names for Jesus, what would you come up with? I would imagine you'd say such names as *Christ, Lord, Son of God, Savior, Shepherd, King of Kings, Lamb of God, and Emmanuel*. Those who know the writings of Isaiah well – or those who are fans of Handel's *Messiah* – might chime in with *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace*. There are surely many others we could cite, with good Biblical authority. I've got another. Let's see if it makes your list: *Mother Hen*. Would any of you have used that name for Jesus? I could be wrong, but I would guess that most of you don't normally think of our savior as a female chicken, though it's right there in the Gospel text we read today. Jesus compares himself to a hen, gathering her brood under her wings. Perhaps we can sing along with Handel's lyrics adjusted a bit: *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Mother Hen, Prince of Peace*. Maybe not. It's probably a bit jarring to think of Jesus as a Mother Hen. For many, it's jarring to think of Jesus or God or the Holy Spirit in *any* terms other than masculine, but we find examples of such in Holy Scripture. Right from the beginning, in Genesis 1, we find that God created us in God's own image: male and female. God's image, then, *cannot* be exclusively male. In Isaiah 66, we read “Thus says the Lord...As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.” In Isaiah 42, God is pictured as a woman in labor. In Psalm 131, David speaks to God, saying that with God, he is like a weaned child with its mother. Jesus' “hen” imagery is reminiscent of such passages as Psalm 36, one of several places where we see God as one gathering children under wings: “How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.” Likewise, the Holy Spirit is often referenced with exclusively male language,

but that is not Biblically sound, either. *Ruach*, the Hebrew word for Spirit, is a feminine noun, as is the Aramaic word for Spirit. *Pneuma*, the Greek word for Spirit, is a gender neutral word. Our finite language often fails us when speaking of an infinite God, and one of the ways this is evidenced is in relation to the pronouns we use for the Trinity.

So, if we can get past using only masculine images for God – and I think we should – we can take a look at this passage with Jesus’ metaphor of a hen. First, though, we should look at what opposing image Jesus uses for Herod. Jesus is told that Herod is out to kill him. Now, this is a threat which should be taken seriously. This is Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, who had previously tried to kill Jesus, after his birth. Herod Antipas is no saint, either, for he is the one who had John the Baptist arrested and later beheaded. Jesus, however, does not respond the way that we might expect him to respond, or at least the way that *we* might respond. Hearing that Herod wants to kill him, Jesus does not go into hiding. Instead, he taunts Herod. He sends a message back, saying, “Go and tell that *fox* for me...” Now, a fox is a clever animal. In fact, fairy tales from many cultures represent the fox as cunning, crafty, and sneaky. Everyone knows you can’t trust a fox, and Jesus certainly doesn’t trust Herod, but he isn’t too concerned about him, either. As Richard Lenski, the author of a series of New Testament commentaries, put it: “He who is master of demons and diseases remains serenely undisturbed by any barking of a tricky fox.” Jesus essentially says to the fox, “I’m undeterred by what you have to say. I’ve got a job to do, and I’m going to go ahead and do it.” Jesus will not be scared away from his mission. The tricky fox will not be a factor in God’s work through Jesus, who will continue his work of casting out demons and performing cures.

In contrast to the fox, Jesus says that he is like a Mother Hen. He says, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.” It is in the nature of a hen to protect her brood, and that is what Jesus wants to do for the people of Jerusalem. We have a savior whose love is ever-present. Jesus’ ministry of teaching, compassion, and salvation is communicated through love and protection, as of a mother hen. This is the metaphor that Jesus gives us, that of a mother hen who is unafraid of a crafty fox.

How do *we* see things, though? We are generally much more concerned by the foxes of this world. They are quick and sneaky, with sharp teeth and claws. The foxes of this world have political power and strength available to them. On the other hand, the hen is heavy and slow. She has wings, but can barely fly. She cannot escape harm. The hens of this world are caring, but they don't have much power.

Which side do we want to be on? The side of might or the side of frailty? It's easy to see what many have chosen. Our society values violence over peace, from our entertainment choices to sports to military. Presidential candidates currently are arguing about who will be more ruthless with enemies, with talk of carpet bombing and wanting to see if "sand can glow in the dark" and talking about plans "to take out [terrorists'] families." We have, all too often, cast our lot with the foxes rather than with the hens. Jesus said of Jerusalem that they were not willing to be gathered under his wings, and the same is often true of us.

However, the foxes of this world who believe they are invincible are sadly mistaken. Yes, they have earthly power, but that power is fleeting. Herod's power was given to him by the Roman authorities, who could just as easily take that power away. Today, we only know about Herod as a character in Jesus' story. Without Jesus the Mother Hen, we wouldn't even know the *name* of Herod the Fox.

And so, the ultimate position of safety comes in Jesus' call to to come under the protection of his wings. Yes, it may seem to be a vulnerable position. What can the hen do but envelop her chicks in her soft body? But what else do we need?

There are many stories of chicks who have survived barn fires because the mother hen wrapped them in her protective wings, giving up her own life in the process, or who have survived a fox attack because the mother hen took the brunt of the attack to save them. That is the loving mother hen we have in Jesus, who willingly laid down his life to save us. Jesus longs to wrap us in his wings, but *it is our choice*. He did not force those in Jerusalem to choose him over Herod. Jesus wants us to come under his protection, but he

will not command it. We must choose to surrender our trust in political or physical might in order to come under the wings of Jesus.

Jesus has work to do. He said “on the third day I finish my work.” The third day. The day of resurrection. During the season of Lent, our work is to prepare ourselves for the joy of Easter. We must choose to give up our false securities in order to come under the true security of the wings of our savior. We must trust in the one who was not afraid of any foxes, but also willingly surrendered his life for our sake.

And our trust should be in God alone, though often we are like the old joke about a climber who fell off a cliff. As he tumbled down, he caught hold of a small branch wedged in the rock.

“HELP! IS THERE ANYBODY UP THERE?” he shouted.

A majestic voice boomed through the gorge: “I will help you, my son, but first you must have faith in me.”

“Yes, yes, I trust you!” cried the man.

“Let go of the branch,” boomed the voice.

There was a long pause, and the man shouted up again, “IS THERE *ANYONE ELSE* UP THERE I COULD TALK TO?”

We often trust in God, but hedge our bets with a backup plan. Martin Luther wrote a hymn called “Grant peace, we pray, in Mercy, Lord.” The lyrics state “For there is none on earth but You, None other to defend us. You only, Lord, can fight for us.” This is the posture of trust. This is faith in the true security which God alone can provide. It is as our Psalm states, “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?” In this season of Lent, and always, let us give up our sense of security in the foxes of this world and in all that is fleeting and instead trust fully in the grace, mercy, love, and protection of our Eternal God, who will always wrap us up in the wings of love. Amen.