

LENT TWO, YEAR C, MARCH 13, 2022

I must confess that of all the many and varied images of God in the scriptures, I really love this image of God as a mother hen gathering her brood under her wings. Think about it for a moment. It's not an image that you would really want to embrace - a chicken. We consider chickens to be one of the dumbest and docile creatures that exist. They scurry about pecking on the ground for their feed or are in a coop laying their eggs. We use the chicken or hen for unflattering images such as using the expression of someone being henpecked which is an offensive term denoting nagging, torment and faultfinding. This is not exactly an inspiring image to use for God.

It's interesting that in this gospel lesson the other animal named is the fox. How many stories do we know which pits the chicken against the fox and the chicken is the one that always loses. What's that expression about not letting the fox guard the hen house? We have a higher image about foxes as we say foxes are clever. We call people foxes sometimes to say they are sexy, cool, beautiful, and awesome. Even to say someone is as sly as a fox is to say that person is smart and clever. We also use the expression crazy as a fox to mean that person is smart and can outwit other people. The actions of a fox appear a little crazy but he is in fact acting in a brilliant manner to save himself. No wonder the fox outwits the chicken all the time.

However, in Jesus' time to call someone a fox was considered to be an insult. Think of the foxes in Aesop's fables where they are considered to be sneaking, lying, cowardly, untrustworthy. In the gospel reading we are told King Herod is a fox, a clever sly fox while Jesus or God is a chicken. It appears to be a very lopsided match with Herod having all the points in his favor.

But I neglected to tell you a few other things about chickens. A recent study has shown that chickens are intelligent and emotional animals, and are able to demonstrate thinking skills on par with mammals and primates. If you hide an object from a chicken, they will still know it's there — this is something even young human kids aren't able to do. Mother hens feel empathy. They are such attentive, caring parents that they 'feel' their chicks' pain. In experiments, female chickens showed clear signs of anxiety when their young were in distress. This is one of the essential underpinning attributes of empathy – the ability to be affected by, and share, the emotional state of another.” Amazing, however, perhaps what chickens are best known for is that they are notorious for defending their chicks. Have you ever seen a chicken hawk go after its prey? The chicken fluffs out her wings and protects her chicks with her own body. The chicken hawk will dive and the hen turns her body toward him presenting her breast without moving from her children. The predator is thwarted by the determined self-sacrifice of the mother hen. She is too big to be a target and the chicks are too safe under her wings to be seized so he flies away.

There are also numerous stories from farmers who have witnessed fires in a barn and they will find the remains of a hen still on her nest. And when they remove her dead body, they find live chicks underneath. It is not unusual that chickens will even attack snakes that make their way into the coop. Mother hens are ferocious when it comes to protecting their young.

When we go back to the gospel lesson it is clear Jesus intends to protect the chicks – to protect us, but not by becoming a fox himself. He would not fight fire with fire. When

Herod and his bullies came looking for Jesus, Jesus, in essence, fluffed himself up as a hen and settled down in the path of the fox and said here I am. I am protecting my children by putting myself in the line of fire. What does that tell us about God?

It tells us that God welcomes all her children under her wings, no matter how we behave, or how we look, or what annoying and inappropriate things we do. The God who validates me as a mother, who assures me that when I have made mistakes, when I have wandered from the right path, and when I have been overwhelmed by the foxes, those holy wings are still spread over me, protecting me, sheltering me, keeping me safe, loving me.

It's funny how being that vulnerable like a mother hen protecting her chicks and, in some cases, sacrificing herself, on one hand is heroic but on the other hand isn't appealing. It's an anathema to us. We don't want to see God as being vulnerable. We don't want to be seen as being vulnerable. We want God to be fearless, ferocious and intimidating. We'd rather be or think it is the fox that we need to emulate. We want to be sly, cunning and outsmart everyone to get ahead. We want God to outsmart everyone and everything. Which is better to be compassionate and vulnerable or to be thinking of ways to outsmart whoever or whatever you think needs to be taken down sometimes to your own detriment? What or who are the foxes that we deal with on a daily basis?

Just for a moment I want you to think about the traps that the foxes of today lay for us. We are torn in so many ways just like Herod was in attempting to placate both the Romans and the Jewish people. Herod was trying to serve two masters, just like most of us do in trying to maintain a balance between what our faith teaches and what society wants us to do. And as promising and enticing as what society preaches to us, given the chance the fox will outsmart you, take everything, and leave you empty.

The fox is in the hen house--as credit cards promise happiness, but only deliver debt and worry. The fox is in the hen house--as the news assaults us with a continual alarm, fear for who is out there, and painting opponents as idiots and liars.

The fox is in the hen house--telling people that working 60 to 80 hours a week will pay off in time, but when the budget gets tight the fox will lay you off and wish you good luck. The fox is in the hen house spinning tales and telling lies so that you will turn against each other. The fox is not worthy of our faith though the fox would like us to believe otherwise.

As people of faith in a culture of fear, we must be about calling the fox a fox, and talk about truth in a world of misstatements, talk about what love really is in a world of pleasure and pleasing, and prioritize our lives by what really matters.

This is why Jesus chooses the smart, self-sacrificing, chicken as his model. Loving a vulnerable mother hen God is the riskiest thing some of us can imagine doing. We'd prefer the lion or fox perhaps. And yet a yearning mother hen is the mother we belong to. She's the one weeping for us. She's the one calling us home. The reach of her wings is wide. The hospitality of her shelter is vast. Her body and her heart are on the line, and yet her desire is fixed on us. On all of us. She will never, ever stop calling us home.

You and I are those little chicks who seem bent on ignoring the efforts of the one who would save us from all that would threaten us. And that is where the image finally comes home. We enter this story as that brood of chicks who are scattered, distracted, unable, somehow, to comprehend the very real danger which is threatening. Jesus' lament over Jerusalem is also over you and me and this world which all too often still

refuses the gifts Jesus would so freely give, when all it would take for us to survive the attack of the fox would be for us to stand still and stand under the wings of Christ.

So be wise because if we don't the fox will do it for us and lead us down the path to destruction. While the fox may be more attractive and ready to offer us quick fixes and easy gain, only the mother hen will lay down her life for her brood. The fox is in the hen house, and only Christ has laid down his life for you. Amen