

A Hen in the Foxhouse

Luke 13:31-35

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

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At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." 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. 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.' 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! 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.'" (Luke 13:31-35, NRSV)

I was talking with a friend a while ago. He was telling me how it feels to have an empty nest after nearly twenty years raising two children, both sons. And he told me of the ache he feels to see his oldest son make choices that go against what he'd been taught, how he'd been raised, choices that jeopardized his well-being – physically, emotionally, spiritually.

My friend told me of a conversation he had with his son right before he left for the second semester of college. He told him that there would have to be some changes. My friend began by gently telling him that he was concerned about his barely-passing grades. "Maybe you should consider moving back on campus," he said. "And I think you need to take a long, hard look at the relationships you are investing in, the way you are spending your money and time." That lit the conversation on fire. Voices were raised. And then two months passed, two months of a father longing to embrace his son, two months of one-word answers to questions, two months of wanting to just go back to the way things were, when his son needed him and trusted his counsel.

Have you ever stood watching someone make choices that you know are wrong, that you know will hurt them, that you know will end badly, and you can't stop them? If you do, you know the depth of Jesus' lament over Jerusalem. The agony of love is that we cannot ensure the safety of the ones we love so deeply.

As Luke tells it, after Jesus was baptized, he was led into the wilderness and was tempted by the devil for forty days. Forty days. One, two, three, four, five, six . . . there's no need for us to duplicate what John, Lois, and the children counted out last week.

But it's important for us to remember that for forty days -- forty days -- Jesus withstood the evil one's temptations to choose a way that was different than God's way, the way that led to the cross. And so,

later, when a group of Pharisees come up to him and tell him to run, to flee, to go somewhere else, anywhere else, because King Herod wanted to kill him, I think Jesus easily recognized the voice that was behind their voices. It was the voice that he had heard in the wilderness, the voice of the tempter. And this time, it's almost as if Jesus pays no attention to it. Instead of going himself, saving himself, Jesus tells those Pharisees, "You go." "You go tell that fox" that I will not go. I will continue to do what I've been doing, healing, driving out demons, and I will reach my goal.

You go tell that fox, Jesus said. When a fox appears in children's stories and fables, it's usually used as a crafty, tricky animal. The fox's power lies not in brute strength but in its cunning ability to enter the henhouse by surprise. Its goal is to use fear to confuse and disrupt the chickens and then, finally, to isolate one and to carry it away. And so, the fox strikes in the dead of night, when all seems safe, when all is quiet. And then, all of a sudden, it's terror.

On Friday morning, this week, we were reminded yet again that this is not simply a children's story. In fact, in some ways, it can seem like this world is the fox's house. When all seemed safe, when all was quiet, it was terror for people who had simply gathered to pray. They were Muslims, but Christchurch was their home. They should have been safe there. On Saturday, an interfaith prayer vigil at the University of Michigan was disrupted amid reports of an active shooter on campus. It turns out the sound that started this warning were balloons popping.

*Fear is a powerful thing, as a Bruce Springsteen song says,
It can turn your heart black you can trust
It'll take your God filled soul
And fill it with devils and dust.*

Jesus looked over Jerusalem and he grieved for a city gripped in fear. It was a fear that that led Jerusalem to be known as the city that killed prophets, the city that stoned those that were sent to it, the city that rejected its very salvation. If only it knew the extent of God's love, the longing that God felt to save the city from itself and its own bad choices. Love like a father wanting to reach out to his prodigal son. Love like a mother wanting to save her daughter from an abusive relationship. Love like a friend watching a friend refuse help as she sinks deeper and deeper into depression. Love like a hen wanting to gather her chicks under her wings. Know my protection. Know the safety of my counsel, the wisdom of my advice. Know the warmth of my love.

With a world with foxes at large, Jesus refused to be cast as the king of the jungle. He chose the role of the mother hen. The one who stands between the fox and the chicks. The one who shields the chicks from danger. She has no roar like the lion. She cannot soar from evil like an eagle. Her only protection for her chicks lies in her body. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first. (See Barbara Brown Taylor, "As a Hen Gathers Her Brood," *Christian Century*; February 1, 1998; accessed through [EBSCOHost](#)).

And we, on this side of Easter, know what happened when that was tried. "Go tell that fox," Jesus said, I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day, I will reach my goal." We on this side of Easter know that the life that Jesus has and offers to us is eternal life, a life that never ends.

Yes, Jesus lamented over Jerusalem. Jesus grieved the city's rebellion and rejection of God through His messengers. But, despite that, Jesus went forward into Jerusalem as a mother hen with her wings outstretched, her vital organs exposed, longing to cover with wings of love those chicks who think it's best to go everywhere else for safety but there.

We are not made safe by going our own way. We are not made safe by our own righteousness. We are made safe and secure by the One who grieved, longed, and loved so deeply that he outstretched his arms like a hen outstretches her wings, and invites us live life by the love of the cross, given for us and offered to all.

By the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, Jesus will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. And so, with the fox at large, in a world gripped in fear, it is Christ's church that is called to spread its wings out wide, sheltering the fearful, the abandoned, the lost, offering its body for all.