

March 16, 2025  
The Second Sunday in Lent – Year C  
Trinity Church, St. Louis  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Genesis 15:1-12,17-18*

*Psalm 27*

*Philippians 3:17-4:1*

*Luke 13:31-35*

In the Name of the God of all Mercy. Amen.

During the seemingly endless months of Covid-tide, I spent part of each morning as part of a virtual congregation at Morning Prayer with Robert Willis, the late Dean of Canterbury. The services were filmed, edited, and streamed by Dean Robert's partner Fletcher Banner, and allowed us a window into the Deanery Garden, along with the many creatures that lived there.

The cats, of course, were the most famous; their antics having gone viral on YouTube. There were also generations of pigs who served as gardeners – preparing old soil for new growth. And then there were the birds: turkeys, pheasants, guinea fowl, Ducky the Duck, a rooster named Russell Crow, and many hens.

It was one of those hens, a broody hen, that was in my mind's eye this week as I reflected on Jesus's lament and startling self-description: "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, but you were not willing."

The image on the front of this morning's service bulletin is from a 20<sup>th</sup> century church on the western side of the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley from the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem. The church is called *Dominus Flevit* (The Lord Wept). A mosaic on the base of altar shows Jesus as a mother hen. (10:30 – this is a modern interpretation of that mosaic by St. Louis icon writer Kelly Latimore.)

It must be said up front that the Biblical tradition is not overflowing with maternal images of God. But there are a few. Jesus might have borrowed the image of God as an enraged she-bear (Hosea 13:8); God as a soaring mother eagle (Deuteronomy 32:11-12); God as a laboring woman (Isaiah 42:14); God as a mom of a healthy, happy toddler (Psalm 131:2), or a skilled midwife (Psalm 22:9-10). But Jesus chose none of those images.

Instead, today, Luke's gospel invites us to contemplate Jesus as a mother hen whose chicks don't want her. Though she stands with her wings wide open, offering welcome and shelter, her children refuse to come home to her, and her wings are empty. This mother is a mother struggling with futility and failure.

At the beginning of today's reading, a group of Pharisees warn Jesus to get out of town, because Herod Antipas wants to kill him. Jesus knows full well not to mess with Herod. It was this Herod, after all, that arrested and beheaded John the Baptist.<sup>1</sup> But Jesus tells the Pharisees that he's not afraid of "that fox." I have work left to do, he tells them, and I won't be deterred by the machinations of a bully.

At this point in Luke's narrative, Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem, the city that rejected God's messengers and killed the prophets. Jesus knows exactly what awaits him there, but he won't change course. Not for Herod, not for anyone.

Jesus, an empty-handed mother in mourning, stands up to a fox, because this what broody hens do. They are fiercely protective of the chicks or eggs within her wings. If you get too close, prepare to be pecked or bitten.

What does this stark, lonely image offer to us as we journey through Lent? This morning, as we ponder an image of the Divine as a Mother Hen, I want us to think about three things: vulnerability, lamentation, and return.

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Vulnerability. Let's be honest, embracing our vulnerability is a challenge. It's why so many folks don't like Lent...all those reminders of our mortality. Vulnerability feels downright, well, unsafe. When Jesus calls Herod a fox, he's mocking him. But he never claims that the fox isn't dangerous. We are not promised immunity from harm.

Jesus the mother hen does not offer an absence of danger, but the fullness of an open-hearted and totally vulnerable self in the face of the things that threaten and frighten us. What Jesus has given, and what he continues to give, is his own life, his own body. What he promises, at great cost to himself, is his very being as a place of refuge for his children. For all of his children — even the ones who want to stone and kill him.

Mother hens plant themselves in the center of danger, swelling with indignation, fear, and courage. They are prepared to do whatever they can to protect the children in their care.

What might it look like to embrace Jesus's vulnerability as our strength? To exchange a popular image of a triumphant, conquering God for one of a mother hen God?

What might it look like to see our vulnerable selves as sheltered under the wings of a ferociously loving God? What might it look like for us to long to provide space and safety to those who are vulnerable to the wiles of foxes in human clothing?

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<sup>1</sup> Herod Antipas (ruled 4 BCE – 39 CE) was one of the sons of Herod the Great (ruled 37-4 BCE), the one in Luke's Nativity story.

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Lamentation. The Jesus in today's gospel laments. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often have I longed to..." All of us have suffered missed opportunities, broken promises, and crushed hopes. All of us know what it's like to fail, to feel rejected. We live in a broken world, and we know how it feels to long for things that will never happen.

Jesus' lamentation is the lamentation of sustained, frustrated, yearning. *How often have I desired to gather you* is a lamentation for all that could have been. *How often have I desired ...* is a lamentation for the real limits of being human. Sometimes, like Jesus the mother hen, we can't do what we most desire to do. Sometimes, we can't save the loved ones we ache to save.

What pulls at your heartstrings? What beckons you into lamentation in this holy season? How might your tears of sorrow open, and water, a place of new hope?

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Lent is a season that calls us to return. The Psalmist cries out, "You speak in my heart and say, 'Seek my face.' Your face, Lord, will I seek." But we don't really, do we? Seek God's face. Not very often, anyway. We are, instead, prone to wander, in love with the lie of being a lone ranger.

Have you ever seen chicks snuggling under a mother hen's wings? It is an image of community, of gathering. It requires us to turn back, to come back, to return. "You were not willing," Jesus tells his wandering children. You would not come back...even when your life depended on it.

What in you is "not willing" to return, to be gathered this Lent? Not willing to offer yourself to the community which is the Body of Christ? And then, to seek and serve those whom God has placed in your life?

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Embracing an image of God as a vulnerable mother hen seems counterintuitive, if not incredibly risky, especially given what's going on in the world right now. To take one example, the rising tide of people embracing the dangerous ideology of Christian nationalism is alarming.

Rooted in a conflation of faith and national identity, this ideological movement, masquerading as a theological "Great Awakening," distorts the Gospel of Jesus, misusing Christianity to justify division, exclusion, inequality, racism, and supremacy. Christian Nationalists demand that laws, culture, and public policies be based on a

distorted interpretation of the Gospel that elevates power and control over love.<sup>2</sup> Christian Nationalism relies on images of God that are patriarchal, demanding, and punitive. A God with sharp teeth, like a fox. A God who judges people by what they look like, where they're from, and what they possess.

It's no wonder that we're fearful and anxious about these developments. It's no wonder that we might prefer a God like the Lion of Judah, or the infuriated bear, or any of the images of a God who would smite our foes. And yet, today, a yearning, vulnerable, mother hen is the God we are called to think about and to worship. She is the one weeping for us. She is the one calling to us, to all of us, to return to the home of her wings.

This section of Luke reminds me of words from Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), 11<sup>th</sup> century theologian, philosopher, and abbot. Here is a version of one of his meditations called *A Song of Christ's Goodness*.<sup>3</sup> It may surprise some of you that these words come from the pen of a medieval Italian monk, a man who has been dead for almost one thousand years, but I invite you to make Anselm's meditation your prayer in these days.

Jesus, as a mother you gather your people to you; \*  
you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.  
Often you weep over our sins and our pride, \*  
tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgment.  
You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds, \*  
in sickness you nurse us and with pure milk you feed us.  
Jesus, by your dying, we are born to new life; \*  
by your anguish and labor we come forth in joy.  
Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness; \*  
through your gentleness, we find comfort in fear.  
Your warmth gives life to the dead, \*  
your touch makes sinners righteous.  
Lord Jesus, in your mercy, heal us; \*  
in your love and tenderness, remake us.  
In your compassion, bring grace and forgiveness, \*  
for the beauty of heaven, may your love prepare us.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> From an upcoming Pastoral Letter on Christian Nationalism by The Rt. Rev. Deon K. Johnson, Bishop of Missouri.

<sup>3</sup> Canticle Q, *Enriching Our Worship 1*, p. 39, adapted from Anselm's *Prayer to St. Paul* (c. 1070).