



University Christian Church – Austin

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The Hen in the Fox House

Lent 2, c, Feb. 28, 2010

Luke 13:31-35

There are these high moments that point to a Truth we too often forget. It happened during our Ash Wednesday service here in the Sanctuary. In near darkness and in the company of sisters and brothers we know well, and first time visitors whose names were never shared, the richness of becoming a chorus singing a capella transported us... from seventy or so separate people... for a few moments, into an experience of the wondrous One Body of Jesus Christ. We are more and better and different than the sum of our parts. We are a new being with its own spirit. This spirit has its own set of characteristics. Yes, we are more than just a collection of individuals, we are to be the Body of Jesus Christ.... and the question hiding inside our lesson for this morning is whether it is the spirit of Jesus Christ that we embody... or some other spirit?

You see, the question of what the character of a spirit is, is the very focus of this morning's scripture lesson. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent it! How often have I desired to gather your children..." in so many words saying, but your spirit of disobedience to God's designs.... was not willing. Your spirit, Jesus charges, is serving someone or something other than God.

Now, this morning's passage is often tied with another that we find 6 chapters later in Luke. Here Jesus is arriving on the Mount of Olives at the beginning of what we would later call Holy Week. Jesus is looking over the city of Jerusalem spreading out below him in Luke 19:41. In it Jesus bemoans Jerusalem

and Jerusalem's fate. Jesus literally wept over it, saying of Jerusalem, “ if you, even you had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.”

You can see the tie, right? In both passages Jesus bemoans the poor decisions the city has made... and the dark destiny it has created. The so-called “City of Peace” will not know peace, because it has turned from the ways of God and will suffer the consequences of that turn.

When you visit Jerusalem today there are all sorts of places from which you can appreciate the city, but none surpasses the western slope of the Mount of Olives just across Kidron Valley from the Old City of Jerusalem . And on that high sloping hillside is now a small chapel called Dominus Flevit. The Latin translation to English is “Jesus wept,” referring to the both of these Lukan passages of Jesus mourning for Jerusalem. The chapel is built on the place many of the faithful believe that Jesus uttered these words in Luke 19. Having been blessed with several opportunities to spend a number of weeks in Jerusalem studying and researching¹, I can tell you there's no more moving place to put the city of Jerusalem in proper perspective than inside this little chapel. From inside it you can look through a window that faces in panoramic view the east side of the city with the splendid golden domed mosque and the Temple Mount and you see it as a painting bounded by the arch of the window and beautiful metal grill work.

But it is no picture mere photo of Jerusalem. It is the real thing, warts & all. And just down below it, in front of the altar, is a piece of artwork that interprets so well the panorama beyond. It is a mosaic tile creation that shows a white hen with a golden halo above her head. Her protective wings spread out and over vulnerable little yellow chicks that find their safety around her. They look so safe and secure in her care. She, on the other hand, looks fierce, like no sane predator would dare come after her babies!

Around the mosaic are words in Latin that translate into English “How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and then in a separate level... symbolically in what appears to be a red pool of blood, is the last phrase, “you were not willing.”

But a hen. Really? Isn't a hen a silly representative for the present power of God? I mean, the Bible used all sorts of animals as symbols of the divine presence: lions, eagles, and so many more. I think everyone of them would inspire more confidence than a hen.ⁱⁱ And yet, it does sound just right. A hen calling for her chicks to come safely under her protection. A hen who cares so for her little ones, yet remains herself vulnerable to so many marauders. How, indeed, could a hen expect to be able to defend herself and her chicks from a sly Fox, known for its cunning, quickness, and fangs?

This passage reminds me of another story.ⁱⁱⁱ Once there was a Nigerian youngster, a boy, named Olu who had a pet chicken, a white chicken. The boy loved the chicken dearly and he was distraught when one day the white chicken disappeared. Then after several weeks a hen returned to the village with seven beautiful little chicks. Olu who was overjoyed and all of the village rejoiced with him. The white chicken provided everything little chicks needed, especially protection from threats.

One day Olu and the older boys of the village as was their common practice commenced to make a large ring of fire into the brushy area outside the village. People stood outside the ring of fire as it burned towards the center. They waited with machete like implements to harvest little animals such as rabbits that would run out of the circle of the fire into their range.

When the hunt was over Olu and his friends walked back through the smoldering circle, one of the boys noticed what appeared to be a mound of feathers and the smell of burnt flesh. Some bird had not escaped from the fire. As they were examining it Olu realized in horror it was his beloved white hen that had been burned unrecognizably black. Why had she not fled the fire? Then the answer came. It was the sound of 7 little chicks that had been covered safely by their mother's body. They were still alive and well. She had died that they might live.

What are we to understand...what are we in the 21st century to take away from a hen named Jesus boldly marching through the house of a fox named Herod?

- 1.) First, though Jesus eagerly took on the role of servant to those in need and those who were joining Him in the service of God's work, He would never behave or cower because someone in power said "cease and desist." And as his body continuing on earth, it is our responsibility to speak truth to power and let the cards fall where they may. Name evil as evil. Name spiritual danger as spiritual danger... then spread out our wings to cover the little ones, thrust our vulnerable chests out to receive the first blows, and stand determined to stand and deter.
- 2.) Second, though Jesus would resist the evil and the oppression of worldly powers as in this morning's passage. He would not, and we should not, resort to that ultimate worldly expression of force, namely violence. The reason that violence is ruled out as tool in any case for the follower of Jesus, is because the Lord who told us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, demonstrated that true love can understand and transform even those who persecute, even those who oppress others, even those who have done evil upon the innocent and the vulnerable... are themselves also God's beloved children. God has changed some of the worst, into some of the best. Can you say, Saul of Tarsus? So while it is incumbent upon us to hate the sin, we will never grow beyond the need to love the sinner....every sinner.... even a fox like Herod.
- 3.) Third, in this week we honor as a Week of Compassion.... and in a service of worship where momentarily will take up a special offering to care for, and feed, and cloth, and provide medicine and shelter for the poorest and neediest children of God on this little, fragile, blue oasis we call home...it is time for us to understand Compassion as the living core motivation for everything we do. Everything.

My friends in Christ, we are more – far more- than a collection of individuals, even faithful individuals. Together we are the Body of Jesus Christ, sent to save & heal & free in Christ's name and in his very spirit marked by:

- (1.) a fearless commitment to persevere in Christ's ongoing ministry, by
- (2.) a non-violent, but very active resistance to evil in every form, and by
- (3.) a Compassion that will not rest until all God's have met the basic needs of life and abide in God's peace.

In a few minutes we will join together in singing the words of our communion hymn “this is my body and precious blood shed for you, shed for you....In remembrance of me, heal the sick... feed the poor...open the door and let your neighbor in...”^{iv}

Our call couldn't be much simpler, nor much tougher. May God grant us strength and resilience for this journey!

ⁱ Most recently in 2004 at which time we saw Dominus Flevit

ⁱⁱ This thought and several others in this sermon originate in one article and one published sermon by one of my favorite writers and preachers, Barbara Brown Taylor. The article is called “As a Hen Gathers Her Brood” in *The Christian Century*, February 25, 1986. The sermon is called “Chickens and Foxes” found in her book, *The Bread of Angels*.

ⁱⁱⁱ The closest version of the story I remember is found in Leo Hartshorn's blog @ <http://leohartshorn.blogspot.com/2009/02/fox-and-hen-sermon-on-luke-1331-35.html>

^{iv} “In Remembrance of Me,” #403 in the Chalice Hymnal published by Chalice Press. The words are by Ragan Courtney and the music by Buryl Reed and it is arranged by Robert F. Douglas.