

Loving Like a Mother Hen, Sermon Read on Lent 2 (March 13th)

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One moonlit night a Fox was prowling about a farmer's chicken coop, and saw a Hen roosting high up beyond his reach. "Good news, good news!" he cried.

"Why, what is that?" said the Hen.

"King Lion has declared a universal truce. No beast may hurt a bird henceforth, but all shall dwell together in brotherly friendship."

"Why, that is good news," said the Hen; "and there I see someone coming, with whom we can share the good tidings." And so saying she craned her neck forward and looked far off.

"What is it you see?" said the Fox.

"It is only my master's Dog that is coming towards us. What, going so soon?" she continued, as the Fox began to turn away. "Will you not stop and congratulate the Dog on the reign of universal peace?"

"I would gladly do so," said the Fox, "but I fear he may not have heard of King Lion's decree."

What do you think is the moral of Aesop's fable? The answer: Cunning often outwits itself.

There are parallels between this fable and our Gospel story today. Herod is the Fox, Jesus is Hen, perhaps John the Baptist is the Dog, and King Lion is God, of course. Although the Fox lied to the Hen about King Lion's decree of universal peace, we know a different story from God. The truth is that the kingdom of God is at hand and it is present in deep and surprising ways.

How often do we use the term "mother hen" when we refer to a person who is especially nurturing to and protective of those they love? What an interesting metaphor Jesus uses in the Gospel reading – God trying to gather God's children together just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. A hen is probably not the first thing that comes to mind when we think of a protective animal. We would sooner imagine a lion or a fierce bird of prey, something with fangs or talons. Yet, the lowly chicken is the image that Jesus chooses to demonstrate this relationship between God and us. God, the mother hen, calls us to the safety of the nest, underneath those downy wings, behind the heart that beats beneath her vulnerable breast. There is power in this image. Power tied to Abram's covenant with God. Power tied with strength in vulnerability and with relationship.

Today, fear is our fuel: fear of those who are different, fear of death, fear of our own shortcomings, and fear that the things we value will be taken away from us. In response, we

write contracts: contracts for services, contracts for jobs, prenuptial contracts, and, as wonderful and helpful as wills can be, they too, are contracts to make sure the people and things we value will be cared about in the way we want them to be when we are gone. Contracts are about legal protection within relationships. This is where they differ from a covenant, especially a covenant with God.

When Abram creates the covenant with God in our reading today, he is executing an ancient practice. A covenant, ratified in blood, is all encompassing. If you were to make a covenant with your best friend today, it would mean that everything that belonged to them also belonged to you and vice versa. If your best friend happened to have a mansion and a heap of creditors hounding them, guess what? You've got that, too. A contract would protect you from the bad, but a covenant guarantees that you are in relationship and if one goes down, you both go. On the flip side, that also means if one succeeds, so does the other.

God has established covenants with a variety of people and under a variety of circumstances: with Noah, the rainbow promising that God would never again destroy the earth with a flood; With Abram, through animal sacrifice, and later, as Abraham, through circumcision; With Mary, through the blood that came with birthing Jesus, and Jesus himself, who sets his face to Jerusalem so that his blood can become another tie that binds us.

Jesus knew his identity as a prophet and the Son of God. He tells the Pharisees, "Go and tell that fox [Herod] 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.'" Jesus knows the stakes of being what he is and yet, he follows God's call to him. He sees the role of God as one of a mother hen gathering her brood under her protective wings, safe from the ravages of the foxes of life. In Luke's time, that meant not just Jerusalem or Israel, but the Gentiles as well. Like the Pharisees and Sadducees that Jesus encounters, we are often not willing to be gathered in with people that are not like us, instead taking our chances elsewhere. We think we are truly free, but instead are even more at risk and vulnerable to the sly seductions of the foxes among us.

If you are familiar with what happens when a fox gets into a hen house then you know that most times the mother hen herds her chicks under her wings for protection and bares her breast so that the fox must kill her first before it can get to her chicks. It is the only defense she has. Later, there will be a flutter of feathers and motherless chicks running around but at least they are alive, though their mother may be dead. They are given the chance to live. This is the image that Jesus chose to bring to us: our covenant with God means that everything of God's is also ours, even Jesus, God's own son.

The season of Lent is a time of repentance and a time to consider what it means to be in covenant with a vulnerable God. We learn that faith grows through use. The more we encounter our vulnerable God, the more we understand the strength of our own vulnerability. We must choose to live this type of faith each day. When we received the cross of ashes on our forehead on Ash Wednesday, it reminded us exactly how vulnerable and human we are in this world. We are called to something more than living for ourselves and satisfying our contracts. Our God is not

the belly, as it says in Philippians. We are called to be the chicks that lead the way to our mother hen: our God.

In our baptism, we are marked by the cross of Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit as Christ's own forever. We are charged with an imperative call to love like that mother hen who opens her wings wide and exposes her heart to the foxes of the world in the hope that our loved ones may live in the light of our vulnerability. Called to love like someone who is in covenant with God. A fierce and trusting love that encompasses all that which God possesses. When we live this way, we will know the reign of universal peace described in this Franciscan blessing:

“May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart. May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace. May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy. May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done. May the peace of God and the God of peace be with you for evermore.” Amen.