

March 12, 2017

Second Sunday in Lent

The Hen and the Fox and Baby Chicks

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Luke 13:1-9, 31-35

[Repent or Perish]

¹³ At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴ Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

[The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree]

⁶ Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ ⁸ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

[The Lament over Jerusalem]

³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³² 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. ³³ 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.’ ³⁴ 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! ³⁵ 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.’”

Lent week #2 is upon us. Luke chapter 13 is full of lessons: “*Passion Markers*” I’ve called them this season. I’ve three to note from the chapter; there are more, to be sure. In verses 1-5, Jesus answers the first and most persistent question of discipleship: why do bad things happen . . . to anybody? Most especially to people we like, or people like us? You know – nice people, good people? Two examples are given: a terrorist attack of

sorts and a freak accident. The question seems to be, *why did it happen to those particular people?* Because if we can answer that, we can avoid being them. Correct? Keep ourselves and our own loved ones safe, right?

“Nope,” Jesus says, “Wrong question. . . . ‘Am I ready?’ – *That’s your question?*”

Because it might just as easily have been you. Because one day, it *will* be you. Maybe tomorrow, when the gym finally does kill me, and my last words are, “I told you soooooo!” Or fifty years from now, when I’m an old, old lady in my bed.

“Unless you repent” – Jesus’ words – “you’ll die just as they did.”

Not in a terrorist attack or accident. That’s not what he means. But rather, you’ll die not knowing what it means. And in your unknowing, you’ll worry and you’ll fret when you could be living. “Repent,” Jesus said. *Put your future and your past into my care and make it mine to worry over.* “Settle the meaning and the purpose of your death once and forevermore. Then you’ll have nothing left to do, but live.” Faith in Christ makes *how I die* but a detail in the drama of my life in Christ. In life I am His. In death, I am all the more alive in Him!

Verses 6-9 – that little fig tree parable – is Passion Marker #2. Read it like a template for his final days. Jesus is the gardener and his own flesh and blood the compost. Verses 10-25, which we skipped for now (one of my favorite stories in Luke, *the bent-over woman*) is a text in which Jesus uses three words found everywhere in the Bible, but in syntax – together – found only here: *daughter. of. Abraham.*

And finally, after all that, come *the fox, the hen and the baby chicks*. Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, “*Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you!*” We aren’t given to know if these Pharisees are friend or foe of Jesus, only that they don’t want him getting killed *where they are too*. In a play on words only discernable in Greek, Jesus replies, “*No, you go! Go 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 Jerusalem.’*” And as Luke tells it, he breaks into a lament:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often I have longed 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.’”

Jesus was not the first prophet to grieve over Jerusalem, to lament her infidelity and pending desecration. But his had a kind of double echo, striking the still-tender memory of the smashing of Jerusalem by the Romans (no more than ten years before Luke wrote these words) and also echoing the same ancient prophets Jesus himself read and memorized. And then it goes a little sideways with this *hen* metaphor. Jesus’ Bible, our

Old Testament, wasn't without animal metaphors for God. Can you think of any? Lion, bear, dove, wolf, eagle, sea monster. No hens. Granted, I love it, but I also think it's weird – literarily, I mean.

Jesus wants to be *avant garde*, but *a hen*? Why, do you suppose? Because he'd already called Herod *that fox* and he didn't want to mix his metaphors? But in that light, seems like Jesus would have chosen a predator of the fox, instead of a prey, to call himself. Because Jesus does win – right? Herod doesn't win. Rome doesn't win. Death doesn't win. Jesus wins.

Any guesses what animals prey on the fox? The fox's number one predator is humans who want their fur or consider them pests. After that, the list of predators, in no particular order, includes: eagles, coyotes, gray wolves, bears and mountain lions. I learned this from a [science-for-kids-website](#) published by the University of Michigan. Guess what else? If you take this science-for-kids-website and cross-reference it with biblical animal metaphors related to God, only one falls out: coyote – no biblical coyotes, metaphorical or narrative (except in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase [The Message](#)). Eagles, wolves, bears and lions – God is called all of them somewhere in the Bible.

In Exodus 19:4 and Deuteronomy 32:11, a mother eagle catching her eaglets on her pinions (her wing tops) and bearing them in flight is an image of God's protection of the Israelites escaping Egypt and roaming the wilderness, representing God's strength and protection. Sometimes God is the swift eagle who will devour Israel for refusing to repent (Habakkuk 1:8). Other times, God is the eagle who attacks the enemies of Israel (Jeremiah 49:22).

Old Testament or New, *wolves* are always bad guys. They symbolize danger, terror and violence. The divine metaphor is always in the negative. The Bible likes to point out again and again, God is NOT a wolf, but stronger than the wolf – the defeater of the wolf; the shepherd, the protector of the sheep against the wolves (Ezekiel 22, Habakkuk, John 10).

Bears and lions figured once in the prophet Hosea's preaching, when God was particularly fed up with Israel's wickedness. This is chapter 13, verses 7-8: *“When I fed them, they were satisfied, they were satisfied and their heart was proud; Therefore they forgot me. So I will become like a lion to them, Like a leopard I will lurk beside the way. I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs, and will tear open the covering of their heart; there I will devour them like a lion, as a wild animal would mangle them.”* Biblical lions are always kings, but not always of destruction – sometimes salvation. In Revelation 5, John calls Jesus *the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David; he has triumphed.*

When you list them out like that, the feminists start to make a lot of sense; maybe God-the-angry-lion-bear-wolf isn't the **best metaphor** for a new testament, a new era. It's interesting to me that in writing Revelation, the Apostle John declined to keep Jesus'

own metaphor, the *lowly hen*, but understandably so. The *hen of the tribe of Judah, the root of Jesse, has triumphed*, doesn't work thematically, and it sounds kind of silly. Except, EXCEPT that, JESUS USED IT! He intentionally and on purpose chose that which the world regards as weak and without form to shame the strong and to provoke the powerful.

We don't know if those Pharisees went and told Herod what Jesus told them to tell him. Only that Jesus did as HE said he himself would do: *work his way to Jerusalem, and die there*. Herod the fox might have thought he was chasing Jesus the mama hen, but he wasn't. Rome wasn't. Remember what we know, friends. Jesus wasn't on trial before Rome. Rome was on trial before Jesus.

And neither is *the divine* preying on the enemies of heaven. Luke dealt with that in the first five verses. God is NOT out to GET anyone, guilty or innocent. *Mama-bear revenge for stealing her cubs* is NOT the metaphor Jesus chooses for his mission. He has no enemies, only children – babies, whose only need in this world is to stay close to their mother. But most of them, most of the time, are not willing. You know what one of these chicks would do if I set it on the communion table? Walk right off the edge and probably die. Because their eyes are too blind, their wings are too tiny and they are too ignorant to know better.

[Note: for the Children's Message, Pastor Annette had brought live baby chicks to the service, and they remained in an incubator at the front of the sanctuary throughout the service.]

We can know it about a chicken and yet go to our own graves refusing to believe it about ourselves. Jesus wasn't lamenting a city. Jerusalem was itself a metaphor for humanity – a species that never ceases from war nor from wondering why we suffer so, a people both aching for and refusing the very security Jesus came to give us. It made him so sad, knowing that about people, knowing that even through and after what he was about to do in Jerusalem, most folks would keep on wishing for and refusing all he'd done for them.

And yet, the Lord got on with it, for however many of her chicks were willing to believe and to receive the life prepared for them.

Would you pray with me?