

Lent 2 C Sermon  
Luke 13:31-35  
March 13, 2022

*The Noble Chicken*  
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*<sup>31</sup>At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to [Jesus], “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” <sup>32</sup>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. <sup>33</sup>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.’ <sup>34</sup>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! <sup>35</sup>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.’”*

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One bright evening as the sun was sinking, a wise old hen flew into a tree to roost. Just as she was about to put her head under her wing, her eyes caught a flash of red and a glimpse of a long-pointed nose, and there just below her stood a fox. “Have you heard the wonderful news?” cried the fox in a very joyful and excited manner. “What news?” asked the hen very calmly. But she had a queer, fluttery feeling inside her, for, you know, she was very much afraid of the fox. “Your family and mine and all other animals have agreed to forget their differences and live in peace and friendship from now on, forever. Just think of it! I simply cannot wait to embrace you! Do come down, dear friend, and let us

celebrate the joyful event.” “How grand!” said the hen. “I certainly am delighted at the news.” But she spoke in an absent way, and stretching up on tiptoes, seemed to be looking at something afar off. “What is it you see?” asked the fox a little anxiously. “Why, it looks to me like a couple of dogs coming this way. They must have heard the good news and—”

But the fox did not wait to hear more. Off he started on a run. “Wait,” cried the hen. “Why do you run? The dogs are friends of yours now!” “Yes,” answered the fox. “But they might not have heard the news. Besides, I have a very important errand that I had almost forgotten about.” The hen smiled as she buried her head in her feathers and went to sleep, for she had succeeded in outwitting a very crafty enemy.<sup>1</sup>

The fabled enmity between the fox and the hen is the stuff of legend. Most of us have heard this story before, or one very similar. And those of us who have raised chickens know that the wit and wisdom of the hen in this story, is not even remotely reflective of reality!

Even so, I have often felt that the truly unsung hero of the farmyard is the none other than the chicken. An ancient and noble bird descended from the red junglefowl; the chicken has long been my personal favorite member of the avian family. With their diminutive size, less than sharp wit, and inability to fly, the chicken is unlikely to be what most birders would choose to represent the best and brightest of winged creatures. I, however, respectfully disagree.

From an early age I begged my parents to allow me to have a pet house chicken. A request, which they unsurprisingly declined to grant. Instead, I got a fish tank... Not only are chickens incredibly

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<sup>1</sup> “The Cock and the Fox,” Fables of Aesop, <http://fables of aesop.com/hen-fox.html>.

practical birds—egg producers, meat producers, a threat to pesky bugs, and relatively cheap and easy to keep, there is also a certain innate nobility in them—a nobility that apparently Jesus noticed too and referenced in this morning’s reading from Luke’s gospel. Jesus compares himself to a mother hen, longing to gather her chicks beneath her wings.

In our text, the often-maligned Pharisees warn Jesus to escape from King Herod while he still can. Jesus instructs them to tell the old fox that he’s busy doing his work but when he’s done, he’ll be on his way to Jerusalem. The truth is, the Pharisees had good reason to be worried for Jesus.

King Herod’s father had executed his two eldest sons and tried a third for treason. The third son had attempted to kill him by poisoning because of his plan to divide the kingdom into three smaller portions, one for each of the remaining sons. In a family marked by treachery, Herod had to maintain order in his volatile region under the ever-watchful eye of Rome. He had already executed John the Baptist and Herod had Jesus too in his sights. When Jesus referred to him as a fox, we can be sure that he did not mean it as a term of endearment. Rather, in the ancient world foxes were associated with craftiness, lack of strength, a proclivity for malicious destructiveness, and intelligence.<sup>2</sup> The Pharisees knew this and they warned Jesus to get away while he still could.

And that’s when the chicken arrives on the scene! Jesus refers to himself with longing as a mother hen gathering her chicks for protection beneath her wings. But these particular chicks aren’t having any of it. Episcopal priest and author, Barbara Brown Taylor, says it this way: “At the risk of his own life, Jesus has brought the very realm of God within the reach of the beloved city of God, but the city isn’t interested. Jerusalem has better things to

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<sup>2</sup> Commentary by Joel B. Green. “The New Interpreter’s Study Bible.” Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003. Pages 1881-1882.

do than to hide under the shelter of this mother hen's wings. It has a fox as its head, who commands a great deal more respect." She continues, "Consider the contrast: Jesus has disciples; Herod has soldiers. Jesus serves; Herod rules. Jesus prays for his enemies; Herod kills his."<sup>3</sup> Between this mother hen and this fox, Jerusalem wasn't betting on Jesus. Even so, that's what hen's do: they gather their brood beneath their wings and they face danger.

In this text about a sinister fox and a noble chicken, Jesus gives us a profoundly powerful image for the church. As Jesus' ongoing presence in the world, the church is called to imitate him in word and deed. If Jesus longed to gather the chicks under his wings, then perhaps the church should too. Perhaps the church should be a mother hen putting herself between the fragile chicks of the world and the hungry foxes. Like a mother hen, the church is called to welcome, to love, to nurture, to feed, and to protect the chicks and then, when those chicks become full-grown chickens, they are called to do the very same thing.

In so many ways, churches do just that. New England Church comes between the fox and the chicks every time we support the food pantry with money, food, or service; every time we provide shoes or school supplies or gifts for local children; every time we serve meals at Hesed House, pack food at Feed My Starving Children, make up Easter Baskets for Mutual Ground, or write a check to the United Church of Christ Disaster Ministries.

We come between the fox and the chicks when we march in the Pride Parade and declare our unconditional love for all people and all relationships and all families. We come between the fox and the chicks when we educate ourselves and challenge the status quo of racism and white privilege. We come between the fox and the chicks every time a child is welcomed, an elder assisted, a stranger

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<sup>3</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor. "Bread of Angels." Boston: Cowley Publications, 1997. Pages 126-130.

befriended. But even for all that New England Church does, Jesus' call is always bigger, always broader, always more encompassing. Who are the chicks that are still on the fringes, still struggling, still helplessly alone without a brood? Jesus longed to gather them *all* up, like a mother hen, safely beneath her wings. And that is our calling too.

As a kid, I never did get my pet chicken, but this Lent, I think Jesus is calling our church to become like a mother hen; to look out for the struggling chicks in our schools, in our workplaces, and in our communities and welcome them into the brood—sheltered safely under the wings of God's all-encompassing love. This Lent, let's live like Jesus, like a noble chicken, like a mother hen gathering and protecting those who are sick, those who are lonely, those with needs, those who are disenfranchised. Let's live like Jesus and gather all the chicks we can into a brood where truly *all* are welcome. May it be so. Amen.