

Lent 2 C
Luke 13:31-35
March 16, 2025

Nothing Wrong with Being a Chicken
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³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to [Jesus], “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³²He 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. ³³Yet 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.’ ³⁴Jerusalem, 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! ³⁵See, 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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By now, most of you know that prior to moving to Aurora, I kept a small flock of backyard chickens. Yes, my girls, as I called them: Flora, Fauna, Merriweather, and Rose. They were so great. They all had distinctive personalities and funny quirks. I know you’re not supposed to play favorites, but Flora was mine. She was a raven-feathered beauty with bronze tips and feathered feet; a French Maran that laid the richest dark chocolate-colored eggs. She was definitely the queen of the coop and the others knew it. She came to me when called by name, raced across the lawn to greet me, intercepted fetch with the dogs, and liked nothing more than to be carried around and talked to.

Admittedly, she was not smart – at least not according to human standards. One day, I had a fleck of something on my lip and, thinking it a bug, she pecked me on the lip. It bled so badly! Another time, she was staring deeply into my eyes, and while I assumed it was purely symptomatic of the special bond we had, she was thinking all along that my pupil was also a bug. That one really hurt. The eye doctor told me it was the first time she'd treated a triple corneal abrasion caused by a chicken.

My girls never got to have broods of their own, but I saw the mothering instinct kick in a couple of times. On two instances, when a hawk started circling to pick one of the other girls off, I saw Flora get them to safety beneath the branches of some low shrubs. Think what you will, but chickens really are amazing birds. I miss them.

Apparently Jesus thought so too. In a show of what appears to be genuine concern for his well-being, Luke reports that some Pharisees came to warn Jesus that wicked King Herod had set his sights on him. They all knew that was the last place anyone wanted to be. In ruthless moves to protect his power, Herod had executed two adversaries and tried a third for treason. If that's how he treated his own sons, imagine what he did to his actual enemies!

But, Jesus responded in a characteristically enigmatic way, “Take a message to that fox for me,” he said. “I’ve got plans for the next three days then I’m setting *my* sights on Jerusalem.” Then, in a far-off sort of way, he continued, “Oh Jerusalem, you kill all your messengers. How I long to gather you under my wings as a hen gathers her chicks.” It’s a really tender moment and while I’m honestly not sure how Jesus got from Herod to hens, there’s something quite beautiful about the idea that a man who’s believed to be God by nearly two and a half billion people refers to himself in such maternal terms.

Those participating in our adult Lenten study will be familiar with this kind of language, having explored the writings of 14th century mystic Julian of Norwich who wrote, “*This fair lovely word 'mother' is so sweet*

*and so kind in itself that it cannot truly be said of anyone or to anyone except of [Jesus] and to him who is the true Mother of life and of all things. To the property of motherhood belong nature, love, wisdom, and knowledge, and this is God.”*¹ Feminine images of God or of Jesus, while not entirely absent the pages of scripture, are less common and certainly worth paying attention to.

While the people of Jerusalem never did shelter beneath his outstretched wings, Jesus did give us a powerful image for the church. Imagine with me for a moment that instead of a cross, an instrument of torture and death, or an ichthys fish, or a chi-rho, or even a magnificent steeple and stained-glass windows, imagine that the chosen symbol for the church was a hen instead – even a hen on the steeple. Would the church then better embody its mission of gathering and welcoming, loving and protecting, nurturing and nourishing all the little lost chicks of the world beneath her sheltering wings? After all, isn't that what we're supposed to do?

The overwhelming majority of us in this room and on our membership rolls came beneath the sheltering wings of this congregation from some other place. We came as Baptists or Advent Christians, Evangelicals, Lutherans, or Catholics, Anglicans or Unitarians or non-church people. We left those places because we moved or because we were removed, because of our beliefs and values, or because of our identities. And we found welcome and we found safety. We found our people and we found our spiritual home. But how many others haven't, I wonder. On our website we say that “you are welcome here” and we say it on our outdoor signage and on our social media accounts, but how many people still haven't heard it or seen it or felt it?

New England Church, these are our people and this is our spiritual home, but it also comes with an actionable purpose: to gather and welcome, love and protect, nurture and nourish the other little chicks that still crave

¹ Tr. Edmund Colledge. *Julian of Norwich, Showings*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1979.

shelter, community, and belonging. Just as any other mother hen would do. Just as Mother Jesus longed to do.

I don't plan on replacing the cross behind me with a chicken any time soon, but I do hope we will continue to be the mother hen so many little chicks need. May they find safety and affirmation and love beneath our wings. Amen.