



February 28<sup>th</sup> 2010- The Rev. Scott Pittendrigh

Text: Luke 13:31-35

Using resources by Barbara Brown Taylor's "Chickens and Foxes" and "Wed by God"

Let us pray:

Gracious and loving God,  
may it be your word that is spoken here;  
may it be your word that is heard;  
and may it be your word that is received into our hearts,  
through the One who longs to gather us  
as a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings --  
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

There was once a fox who kept marauding a hen house. He especially liked the eggs and the little chicks, not only because they were tender and tasty, but because they were defenseless. Over the years, brave hens and roosters had stood up to the fox, and had been killed by him. This had happened so often that the roosters and hens had given up, afraid of feeling powerless. Now the fox simply continued to raid the eggs and the chicks, completely unopposed. One night, to his great surprise, a mother hen stood her ground. She sang her song that gathered her chicks to her; they sheltered under her wings and she faced the fox. He killed her, and the fox thought 'that was that'...but he was wrong.

After many years of reading today's Gospel I find that this passage (Luke 13:31-35) is now emerging for me as enacted parable, like this one I just shared with you about a fox and a hen.

This year, I find that where I am in life has allowed me to see the connection between Jesus calling Herod a fox, and his self-identification as a mother hen, and the people of his country, and particularly of Jerusalem as the threatened chicks. This deepens for me the meaning of "feminine divine;" in other words how this image of mother hen, shows the feminine in Jesus, and the feminine in God. God is not only cradling the world, God is with us against evil, even putting the divine self at risk, whatever that might mean.

And today's gospel has also given me a new understanding of the church and how it can participate and share in God's mission that is already present and active in the world. This gospel passage is helping me to look in new ways at what the term "mother church" might actually mean in this case. It is helping me to see that the church will have its greatest impact to bring about goodness, compassion, love and peace, on this earth when it focuses more on what it can do as a whole for others than when it thinks only about its own survival and individual fears and does not take risks.

This past week I attended a day for the clergy of the diocese of B.C. with our bishop to talk about the DTT Report and the recommendations this report is making before synod next weekend. Archbishop Hutchison had also been invited as an observer to report back to us his reflections on the day. It was a very good day. One thing that became clear to me in the discussion we had was that this report ultimately is calling us to focus not on our individualism (our parishes only) but on the (whole) body of the church itself, and how does this body (the church) fulfill the goal of making new disciples and feeding God's sheep in this day and age – and in this particular region (Pacific Northwest) where 36% of



the people claim no religious affiliation. When we in the church start focusing on the “me” and “my” of it all, (in other words) we don’t catch God’s vision to care for the hungry and thirsty of this world. We start looking only at ourselves/our own parishes and, for example, the color of the carpet we don’t like, the bills that we have to pay, or how the DTT affects “my” parish. In light of this, Archbishop Hutchison reminded us of a great quote from many years ago by Michael Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury, who said: “The church that lives to itself, dies by itself.”

So yes, this DTT report is not perfect and will leave us with a lot of hard work to do, but it does have a vision which will give this church life. It is a very bold vision which acknowledges that some things will have to die in order for new life to come. I want you to know that as your rector, I am putting my faith in this report’s recommendations, because ultimately I believe it will move us in the right direction.

More and more I am convinced that we miss something vital to our faith when we insist on approaching God one by one. Our individual relationships with God are very important, but they do not make us the body of Christ. It is our life together that makes us Christ’s body, a mysterious organism that is much more than a collection of individuals. At the 9:15 service today the Catechumens, Catherine and Pamela who is bringing her son Ethan for baptism, did not have a private ritual today. It was done in the context of this community as it gathers to worship God. And when they are baptized at Easter it will not be only to this community of St. John’s, Cobble Hill they are baptized into, but to the worldwide Christian church.

When we come together to worship, we form a new being with a name and an address, which has its own life and reputation. We call it the church—not the building but the people—a phenomenon that has been around longer than any of us. When you or I identify ourselves as members of the church, we get credit for things we did not do.

We may also get blame for things we did not do, but the point is, the church is more than its individual members. We have a community identity and a community mandate. We stand for something, which is good for us to recall from time to time. Do we, as a body, resemble Christ or have we taken on the characteristics of someone else? Are we true to our head or are we giving him a headache by yanking away and refusing to belong to him?

In today’s gospel you can hear the kind of anguish in Jesus when we do that. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” he says, choked with tears. “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” It is the lament of one whose love has been scorned, whose protection has been rejected.

At risk of his own life, Jesus has brought the precious reign of God within the reach of the beloved city of God, but the city of God is not interested. Jerusalem has better things to do than to hide under the shelter of this mother hen’s wings. Why? Because it has a fox as its head, who commands a great deal more respect. Consider the contrast: Jesus has disciples; Herod has soldiers. Jesus serves; Herod rules. Jesus prays for his enemies; Herod kills his. In a contest between a fox and a chicken, whom would you bet on?



On the slopes of the Mount of Olives, some distance from Jerusalem, there stands even today a small chapel called Dominus Fleuit, a Latin name that means “the Lord wept.” According to legend it marks the spot where Jesus stood looking across the Kedron Valley at the great city of Jerusalem and wept for it. The wall behind the altar of this little chapel is made out of glass, which gives the visitor a splendid view of the skyline of Jerusalem. On the front of the altar is an image of a hen—a bright, bold-looking bird made out of coloured tiles with a flock of little chicks under her wings.

Remember in the words of Jesus’ lament, he did not liken himself to a rooster. A rooster can defend himself. He has sharp spikes on the back of his feet that work like little stilettos on anyone who bothers him. A rooster can also peck pretty hard, and he does not wait for you to peck first. If you have ever tried to get eggs from a hen house with a rooster on the loose, then you know what I mean. No, Jesus likened himself to a brooding hen, whose chief purpose in life is to protect her young, with nothing much in the way of a beak and nothing at all in the way of talons. About all she can do is fluff herself up and sit on her chicks. She can also put herself between them and the fox, as ill-equipped as she is. At the very least, she can hope that she satisfies his appetite so that he leaves her babies alone.

How do you like that image of God? It’s certainly not a new one! There are many, many, feminine images of God throughout the Bible. I have always loved this image of God – especially in terms of comfort. But in terms of protection, some have argued that such an image leaves a lot to be desired. In other words, when the foxes of this world start prowling really close to home, when you can hear them snuffling right outside the door, then it would be nice to have a little bigger defense budget for the hen house.

I love the story I read a few years ago about a group of clergy in the U.S. who were sent invitations (for promotional purposes) to view a Clint Eastwood movie called Pale Rider. Most of them went wondering what in the world this movie had to do with the church. As it turned out, Clint played a frontier preacher with a past. What kind of past was never clear, but he walked around in a clerical collar looking deeply pained, and once when he took his shirt off you could see the scars of three bullet holes in his back.

One day he rode into a mining town that had been overrun by bad guys (we could call them “foxes.”) The corrupt sheriff was in cahoots with a bunch of armed bullies who were always taking things that did not belong to them and then killing anyone who got in their way. At first Clint just took it all in, getting clear who the foxes were and where their lair was.

Then one day he calmly walked into the bank and produced the key to a safe deposit box (a clue to his past, in that very town!) Alone in the vault, he pulled the box from the wall and opened the lid. Inside this box were a pair of six shooters and a belt of bullets. Clint carefully took it out and strapped it around his waist. Then he took off his clerical collar and put it in the box while all the clergy in the audience went wild. “Yes!! Go get ‘em, Clint!! Gun down those foxes and nail their tails to the wall!!!” Which is exactly what he did, to the great satisfaction of everyone in the theatre.

That was Clint Eastwood, but Jesus is Jesus. He too bore old scares on his body. He too meant to protect the chicks from the foxes but (the difference is) he would not become a fox himself in order to do it. He refused to fight fire with fire. It reminds me of a more popular saying today often used in the



U.S. during the war in Iraq: "Don't become a monster in order to defeat a monster." When Herod and his bullies came after Jesus and his brood, he did not produce any six-shooters to stop them in their tracks. He just put himself between them and the chicks, all fluffed up and hunkered down like a mother hen.

If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus' lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world --wings spread, breast exposed --but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand.

Jesus won't be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first; which he does, as it turns out. He slides up on her one night in the yard while all the babies are asleep. When her cry wakens them, they scatter.

She dies the next day where both foxes and chickens can see her -- wings spread, breast exposed -- without a single chick beneath her feathers. It breaks her heart . . . but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand.

And God has bet the farm on the hen.

And the hen's church is what we are left with. The church of Christ as a big fluffed up brooding hen, offering warmth and shelter to all kinds of chicks, including orphans, runts, and maybe even a couple of ducks. The church of Christ planting herself between the foxes of this world and the fragile-boned chicks, offering herself up to be eaten before she will sacrifice one of her brood. The church of Christ staying true to whose body she is, by refusing to run from the foxes and refusing to become one of them.

Who would have thought being a mother hen offered such opportunities for courage? Maybe that is why the church is called "Mother Church." It is where we come to be fed and sheltered, but it is also where we come to stand firm with those who need the same things from us. It is where we grow (we don't remain chicks forever) by giving what we have received, by teaching what we have learned, and by loving the way we ourselves have been loved—by a mother hen whose love is stronger than death. May God bless us, the members of this church, with trust, faith and courage as we carry out God's mission to this world. Amen.

