



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

2nd Sunday of Lent: March 17, 2019

Sermon Title: "The Hen"

Gospel Text: Luke 13:31-35

On January 26, 1784, Ben Franklin wrote a letter to his daughter Sally. The newly established United States had recently adopted the Bald Eagle as its national symbol, and Franklin was not a fan. He wrote, "I wish the Bald Eagle had not been chosen the representative of our country. He is a bird of bad moral character. He does not get his living honestly. You may have seen him perched on some dead tree near the river, where, too lazy to fish for himself, he watches the labor of the fishing hawk; and when that diligent bird has at length taken a fish, and is bearing it to his nest for the support of his mate and young ones, the Bald Eagle pursues him and takes it from him... With all this Injustice, he is... by no means a proper emblem for... our country..."

Ben Franklin found a silver lining though. He noted, with great pleasure that, "the figure [on our nation's seal actually] looks more like a turkey... [T]he turkey is in comparison a much more respectable bird, and... a true original native of America... [T]hough a little vain and silly, [he is] a bird of courage, and would not hesitate to attack a Grenadier of the British Guards who should presume to invade his farm yard with a red coat on."

Symbols are important, aren't they? We invest so much in them, because they reveal so much about the thing they are called upon to represent. I think we can all understand why the Founding Fathers were more interested in selecting a symbolic bird that represented power, strength, and independence, as compared to any of the other alternatives including, of course, the noble turkey.

Controversial symbolic animals abound in today's Gospel lesson too, and they *also* reveal a great deal. Let's begin with Herod. He was the ruler of that portion of Palestine, and he was a ruthless and violent man. As you'll recall, it was he who had imprisoned and then beheaded John the Baptist. Herod surely thought of himself as something powerful and noteworthy, like a lion. Yet Jesus mockingly referred to Herod as a *fox* – a small, insignificant animal capable of little more than "malicious destructiveness" – nothing more than a "varmint in the Lord's field."¹ Jesus wasn't about to let a mere fox get in his way; he had three days' worth of work ahead of him, casting out demons and healing the sick. Of course, his most essential work – the complete victory over sin, death, and the devil - would *also* take three days, but that's a story for Holy Week.

Maybe the only thing more surprising than Jesus calling *Herod* a fox was the animal symbol Jesus claimed for *himself*. After all, it's Jesus who claimed to be the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God. Those are powerful titles. And yet Jesus chose to describe himself as a modest

little hen, gathering her chickens. I suspect most people in first century Palestine would've been as perplexed by the image of Jesus as a *hen* as we would be if our national symbol was Ben Franklin's turkey.

A hen probably isn't the first symbol for Jesus that comes to *our* minds either. What face or image of Jesus do you think of most? Maybe you see him as a lamb, meekly and submissively going to slaughter. Maybe you picture him in agony on the cross. Perhaps the Jesus that first comes to mind for you is a smiling Jesus, calling the children to come closer. Or is it possible that the image of Jesus that most resonates with you is the Jesus who rages against injustice and exploitation as he overturns tables in the temple courtyard?

Those are all valid, faithful images of Jesus. But the one I suspect we rarely consider – the one our Gospel beautifully presents to us today – is that of a mother hen. “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!” Can you hear *lament* mixed with *unquenchable love*? It's like a mother pleading with a wayward child to return – a mother who *has* never stopped and *will* never stop loving that child.

A hen spreads her wings to cover and shelter her chicks. She offers warmth, assurance, and protection against predators. But in that position, a hen is utterly vulnerable, unable to protect herself, willing to risk her very life to protect her beloved ones. Jesus was prepared to be a hen for his people, even though he knew the price he would pay. Indeed, *Jesus* knew, as *we* know, what even a mere *fox* is capable of doing to a defenseless *hen*.

The symbol of a hen for Jesus, and the depth of love that symbol represents, came into great clarity for me during my time in Jerusalem two years ago. Tradition holds that Jesus regularly went to the Garden of Gethsemane to escape the clamoring crowds, to rest, to pray, and to ponder. It was a place of sanctuary, reflection, and revelation.

Even today there's a plateau just above the Garden where one can look out across the Kidron Valley and see all of Jerusalem. We can only imagine how many times Jesus went there and looked longingly and lovingly at “the city that kills the prophets.” Luke recorded at least two of those times; one is today's Gospel, and the other is in Chapter 19, just before the drama of Holy Week, when Jesus went to that place and, in a vision, foresaw the horrific destruction Jerusalem and its people would one day endure. That day would in fact come less than four decades later, when Roman legions reduced the temple to rubble and massacred the people of the city. As that vision played out in Jesus's mind, Luke simply records that “Jesus wept.”²

A beautiful church now stands on that site. Its Latin name, *Dominus Flevit*, means “the Lord wept.” Accordingly, the church's stone exterior was designed to resemble the shape of a tear drop. The interior is just as symbolically powerful. Behind the altar is a clear window that frames an astonishingly beautiful panoramic view of Jerusalem - the same view Jesus would've seen from those heights. But now, instead of the temple, which was long ago destroyed, the view converges on the place where Jesus's three-day work would eventually be completed: the

Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which encompasses the rock where he was crucified, and the tomb where he was buried and then rose again.

On the front of the altar at *Dominus Flevit* is a brightly colored mosaic of a hen spreading wide her wings to gather her chicks. The hen's image is encircled by Latin words which read: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." This was the essence of Jesus's mission – to *gather* his beloved people, to *protect* and *save* them at *any* cost, and to love them *forever*, without *exception* and without *limitation*.

That's what Jesus continues to do today, for all of us. The foxes of this world still desire to discard, destroy, divide, and demoralize Jesus's beloved people by robbing us of hope, filling us with despair, and paralyzing us with fear. They scratch an ugly line in the soil and say, "Look at *those people*, there on the other side of the line. *They* aren't entitled to Jesus's mercy, forgiveness, and love." But take a closer look. Look carefully across that line. What do *you* see? *I* see a hen, gathering her brood under the protective shelter of her wings, offering love and salvation, no matter the cost. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Citations:

¹ *The Gospel of Luke*, Joel Green, p. 536.

² Luke 19:41