



March 13, 2022: The Second Sunday in Lent

Jesus and Hens

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O Lord: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

“How often have I desired to gather my children, like a hen gathers her brood under her wings.”

I must start by saying I have learned a lot about chickens this week. I had no idea they were as complex as they apparently are. For example, I learned that they have a sense of the near, and far, future. When given the choice between pressing a button *right away* that gives them a *few* pellets and *waiting* for a while to press a button that will give them *more* pellets, 90% of the time, they will wait. Chickens can make logical conclusions of the sort that children are only able to master from about the age of seven.

Hens will nurture chicks that are not their own. I read a story about a family who kept chickens as pets. They rescued a couple of chicks that had been left for dead at a slaughterhouse. And one of their hens quickly moved in to be the mom, cuddling and protecting them under her wings. Mother hens are so protective of their children that you often cannot see the chicks when you first arrive in the barn. Moms puff up and hide their babies beneath them to ensure that not one single chick is taken from their brood. Even more amazing, hens will protect kittens, dogs, piglets, ducklings, under their wings.

Hens are fierce in the face of danger if there are others to protect.

They will fly right at a predator ~ wings flapping, beaks pecking-in order to distract the intruder away from vulnerable chicks. And they willingly die to protect their young. It makes me wonder about the tradition of using the word “chicken” as another word for coward. Jesus was no coward.

<https://www.dw.com/en/i-may-be-a-chicken-but-im-no-bird-brain/a-37005720>

<https://www.thedodo.com/farm-animals-moms-babies-affection-1132949239.html>

www.boredpanda.com/hens-adopt-animals/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic

Now, of course, it’s just a metaphor, but it’s a provocative one. But Jesus had access to other powerful metaphors for God in his Bible (*remember, what Christians have called “The Old Testament” was Jesus’ Bible*). For example: God as an enraged she-bear (Hosea 13:8); God as soaring mother eagle (Deuteronomy 32:11-12); God as laboring woman (Isaiah 42:14); God as mother of a healthy, happy toddler (Psalm 131:2); God as skilled midwife (Psalm 22:9-10). During Women’s history month, these powerful feminine images for God are especially worthy to raise up. But out of all the metaphors that were available to him in his Scriptures, Jesus chose hens.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, teaching, preaching, and healing along the way. Jesus is devoted to this city—its people and all that it represents in the history of his people. In Luke, Jerusalem practically becomes another character. Though he knows Jerusalem will be the site of his demise, nothing, not even the murderous hostility of the Roman puppet Herod, will prevent him from taking his message into the heart of those he loves. Though an easier road must have been tempting, nothing, not even the hostility



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of the people he loves, will prevent him from making himself vulnerable to their hatred. He wants to gather in, not retaliate.

But we know that that mother hens can't make their chicks come to safety; any more than humans can force friends, lovers, spouses, or children to return home. They can only open their wings and wait. They come when they come. In two weeks, we'll have a story from the Gospel about this kind of waiting. The temptation to try to protect loved ones from the painful effects of their choices must have been as heartbreaking for Jesus as it is for any human who watches a child or other loved one walk down a path of destruction.

Jesus' action and metaphor tell us something necessary about God—we so often think in terms of the human desire for God, or about human emotions about God. And yet here is a powerful image of God's yearning for *us*:

“How often have I desired to gather my children, like a hen gathers her brood under her wings.” One of our temptations may be to see God as distant, as a heavenly judge, as the unmoved mover. But Jesus shows us that nothing could be further from the truth. God desires us to be close, to be in shadow of the divine wings, to be safe.

In the reading from Genesis today, we also see God's desire to be in relationship with us, and God's willingness to risk Godself to do it. God comes to Abram in a vision to promise him and Sarai not only a child, but descendants who are as numerous as the stars in the sky, as well as land with carefully specified boundaries. (The part of the story left out by the lectionary writers indicates that fulfillment of these promises will not be without delay and heartache. Nonetheless...)

When Abram asks for reassurance, a very strange, to us, ritual unfolds.

This is the first of two versions of the covenant ceremony that God enacts with Abram. Technically, this is a *promise text*, because a promise is one-way, while a covenant is a solemn, relational, two-way, promise, like marriage. The second iteration of God's covenant asks more of Abram, including circumcision and a name change. Those of you who have been in the Wednesday Bible Study know all of this already!

This morning, God asks Abraham to cut a series of very specific animals in half. And then, God, symbolized by the smoking fire pot and flaming torch, moves between the halves of the animals. This seals God's promise to Abram. This action indicates that whoever walked this gauntlet, so to speak, was saying, “If I break this promise, I will be dismembered, too.”



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Astounding. As if it were possible, God is in effect saying, “I am willing to die to keep this promise out of love and dedication to you.” It is a mind-blowing testament to God’s willingness to become vulnerable for the sake of God’s promise. (*New Interpreters’ Bible*, Volume 1, p. 449)

And of course, this is one of our central claims about God in Jesus. God is willing to die for us. Jesus faces death in order to live the life that promises life for us all. In a world where might seeks to make right, where brute force is glorified, where raw power seems to have its way, Jesus seeks to show us a better way, the way of a hen, who seeks to gather in, rather than retaliate, who seeks to protect rather than dominate, who yearns to connect.

Amen.