

The Fox and the Hen

Luke 13:31-35
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
February 28, 2010

Back in January of 1993, during my final year in seminary, two of my professors, an Old Testament professor and a New Testament professor of Biblical Studies at San Francisco Theological Seminary, led a group of 35 of us on an educational and inspirational three-week tour of Israel, Egypt, the Sinai Peninsula, and Jordan.

Three years later, in 1996, those same two professors led another trip, this time to Greece, Turkey, and the city of Rome. I was on that remarkable trip as well.

Between these two trips combined, I was able to visit a vast majority of the geographical sites recorded in the Bible. One of the greatest benefits of seeing those actual locations in person is that it has made these biblical stories come alive for me.

Though most of us didn't buy into the tourist industry's insistence of the historicity and the "exact spot" theory of where each biblical event occurred (such as the "exact spot" where Moses encountered the burning bush, or where Jesus fed the 5000), I was indeed moved when standing on Mt. Sinai where Moses may have stood, and at the same shoreline of the Sea of Galilee where Jesus of Nazareth actually walked and taught 2000 years earlier. I'm not afraid to admit that it was a powerful and spiritual experience for me to gaze upon the same horizons that Jesus gazed upon.

During our three-day visit to Jerusalem, we walked up the western slope of the Mount of Olives, just across the Kidron Valley from the old walled city of Jerusalem. That's where the Garden of Gethsemane is located, including olive trees whose root systems are claimed to be well over 1000 years old.

Just a bit further up the hill sits a small Roman Catholic Franciscan chapel named **Dominus Flevit**. I would like to draw your attention now to the bulletin insert that contains several pictures of the outside and inside of this chapel. (And in an act of full disclosure, I must admit that these particular photos are not my own, but downloaded this week from the Internet.)

This chapel itself is relatively new, only dating back to the 1950s. During the construction of its foundation, however, they discovered remains of a 5th century Byzantine monastery, and below that ancient tombs dating back to 136 BCE.

The name of the current chapel, Dominus Flevit, is Latin for "the Lord wept". The structure itself is claimed to resemble a teardrop. The chapel's name comes from a passage from the gospel of Luke (19:41-44), which contains the account of Jesus' lament over the sad state of affairs of Jerusalem – especially their inability to recognize and seek peace. According to tradition, it was at 'that spot' where Jesus wept as he looked upon the city that had refused his ministry efforts.

Inside the beautiful chapel, as you can see in the photos, the altar is centered beneath a high arched window that looks directly out over the old city, framing it in a dramatic, panoramic fashion. It almost looks like a painting of the city, yet it's the real, live thing.

On the front of the altar is a remarkably detailed round **mosaic**. It is the depiction of a **white hen** with a golden halo around her head. The red comb upon her head

resembles a crown. Her wings are spread wide to shelter the pale yellow chicks that crowd around her feet. There are seven of them – the biblical number for completeness and wholeness.

The mosaic is rimmed with Latin words in red tiles. Those words come from part of today's gospel text, **Luke 13:34**. Translated into English the passage reads, "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.**" For emphasis, that last phrase is set outside the circle, in a pool of red underneath the baby chick's feet: *you were not willing*.

The rich imagery of this passage is quite poignant. Understanding the depth of Jesus' lament has a parallel to parents who seek to protect their children. But just as there's only so much a parent can do – especially when the child isn't willing, there was only so much Jesus could do to help Jerusalem.

The visual image implies that all Jesus could do was to open his arms. He wouldn't force anyone to walk into them. As a community of faith, I think College Hill has a somewhat similar understanding of the role of this congregation. **All we can do is open wide our arms, provide a safe and welcoming place of sanctuary and hospitality, but knowing that we, too, can't force anyone walk into them.**

And notice that this is the most vulnerable posture there is for a bird – wings spread, breast exposed. Yet this is a powerful image of Jesus' selfless and inclusive love. I believe that we are called to take a similar posture as well. In modeling our ministry on Jesus' ministry, we are led to ask of ourselves: **How vulnerable are we willing to be in continuing to grow into the congregation and ministry that we believe God is calling us?**

Back in Jesus' day, this **image of a mother hen** was probably a curious choice. Where's the biblical precedent for that? What about the mighty eagle found in the book of Exodus, or Hosea's stealthy leopard? What about the proud lion of Judah, mowing down his enemies with a roar? Compared to any of those, a mother hen does not inspire much confidence. Not only that, **it is one of the few female images used in the Bible to describe not only Jesus, but God as well.**

Some of you may own a Bible that contains the books collectively known as the Apocrypha – the books written during the time period between when our Old Testament stops, around 400 BCE, and when the New Testament begins. In one of these books, II Esdras, which the gospel writer Luke would most likely have known about, God laments over the lack of obedience of God's chosen people. It states (II Esdras 1:28-30a):

Thus says the Lord Almighty: Have I not entreated you as a father entreats his sons or a mother her daughters or a nurse her children, so that you should be my people and I should be your God, and that you should be my children and I should be your father? ***I gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.***

This is the image that is echoed in Luke's gospel when Jesus laments over the rejection that the city of Jerusalem has had for its prophets, the rejection which will soon include Jesus himself. It got me thinking this week, what would Jesus' lament be today if he were looking over the city of Tulsa, over the state of Oklahoma, over this country, over the entire world? I don't think anyone would doubt that Jesus would be found weeping, just as he did when looking upon the condition of Jerusalem.

Behind the image of Jesus as a mother hen is also an image of God as a compassionate and caring mother. Jesus embodied that. In our understanding of the role of the church, and as ourselves as Christians, are we not also being challenged to embody this image?

And like Jesus' original listeners, and Luke's original readers, we too are invited to participate in the movement for freedom and liberation in a world where individuals and communities are governed by oppressive powers. For behind all this are threats from both inside and outside sources.

In today's biblical text the threat came from Herod Antipas, the Roman-approved Jewish governor over the region of Galilee. Herod had previously eliminated John the Baptist by having him beheaded. In Luke's story, Jesus calls Herod a "fox." **It is the fox that tries to kill the mother hen.** Herod, of course, will eventually succeed – at least in a physical way.

While both the Greek and English language interpret the metaphor of the fox as a sly, cunning, clever and crafty person, the Hebrew language (a language rich in visual imagery) had an additional connotation. In Hebrew, lions and foxes were contrasted with each other to represent the difference between great people and inferior people. There was even a saying from the collection of Jewish teaching known as the Mishnah: "Be a tail to lions rather than a head to foxes." This saying could be paraphrased, "It is better to be someone of low rank among those who are on the moral and spiritual high road, than someone of high rank among scoundrels."

Luke writes that Jesus called Herod a fox after some Pharisees reported that Herod wanted to kill Jesus. This is one of the few times the Pharisees are portrayed in a positive light. Jesus wasn't so much implying that Herod was sly and clever as commenting on Herod's low moral stature and leadership. When Jesus labeled Herod a fox, Jesus was implying that Herod was not a lion. Herod most likely considered himself a lion, but Jesus cuts him down to size. This, of course, would have been a very dangerous position for Jesus to take, especially in public. Even in our day and age of free speech it can sometimes be risky to criticize public figures in positions of power.

All in all, this passage from Luke is quite a menagerie. In the rich symbolic world of these verses, evil threatens in the form of a fox, and the mother hen laments because her young are exposed but will not accept her instruction and protection. What more can a hen do but stand up to the fox and seek to shelter her young? And what will become of the young if they do not accept the instruction and the shelter of their mother's wings?

An important element in all this for us during this season of Lent can be in recognizing the Divine as a caring and sheltering mother – a mother who hopes that we will listen to and then act upon her wise instructions. So then, how well are you and I, and we as a congregation, listening to and responding to the wise instructions of the Divine? Are we walking towards the open arms of the Divine, or like the chicks in this story, are we unwilling?

And to carry this one step further, **are we as a congregation opening wide our wings to the communities and neighborhoods around us, providing a place of shelter, nurture, compassion, renewal and spiritual growth in an often dangerous world,** a world that is still filled with many foxes?

This is our calling – and our challenge, and it certainly involves spreading the word that this is the kind of community of faith that we are seeking to be. Do I dare speak the word: Evangelism?

Jesus' compassion led him to weep when he considered the plight of those living in the city he loved. The plight of those living here in this city, and especially in this neighborhood should move us to weep out of compassion as well. And then, to see it as a call to action.

Amen.