

A Mother Hen's Love
February 21, 2016 – Lent 2C
First Lutheran Church, St. Peter, MN
Texts: Psalm 27, Luke 13:31-35

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

In a recent episode of the TV show *Modern Family*, one of the characters, Phil Dunphy, has somehow found three duck eggs and is waiting for them to hatch. In typical Phil fashion, he obsesses over these eggs and their care, much to the annoyance of his wife, Claire, who wishes he would get rid of them. Phil builds a whole little village for the ducklings and dares not leave the eggs because he read that newly hatched ducklings will imprint upon the first creature they see and identify it as their mother – and Phil wants to be their mom. But, for whatever reason, Phil is gone when the eggs finally hatch and the first thing the little ducklings see is Claire's face, so of course they imprint on her, much to Phil's dismay. At the end of the episode, Phil is unable to hide his disappointment when the ducks keep following an increasingly exasperated Claire around the house. Over the next few episodes, the ducklings continue to follow Claire, but Phil keeps trying to win them back, keeps showing them his love hoping that they'll accept him as their mother.

In today's gospel, Jesus compares himself to a mother hen who wants to protect her chicks. But no matter how many times she calls for her chicks to come under her wings, they don't listen and refuse the protection she offers. Over the ages she calls to them so she can protect them from the foxes of the world, but still they scatter. But what is she protecting them from? What are these foxes that threaten them? Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God sent prophets to warn the people against the destructive things in the world. Greed. Injustice. Corrupt leadership. They came to call the people to return to God – to return to safety.

Jesus labels Herod as one of these foxes in his time, one of these destructive forces. In many ways, Herod embodied all that the prophetic tradition spoke against: he was a foreigner and seen by many Israelites as a conniving and wicked ruler who the Roman oppressors propped up so they could maintain power. He built grand cities for his own glory and executed John the Baptist. Much of Jesus' ministry is spent speaking against these types of evils in the world—warning us of the foxes we can't always see on our own.

Even today, our Mother Hen calls us to come under her wings for comfort and protection from these foxes, but so often we ignore her and go out on our own, confident in our ability to protect ourselves. And our refusal to accept this love causes Jesus to lament. In the words of one theologian, "If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the sadness in Jesus' voice here. If you've ever watched someone waste their life away on drugs or booze or bad relationships or chasing after material possessions or honors or notoriety or celebrity, or something. Something undefined but just around the corner that will, they hope, make them whole and complete and healed, but that is never there; then you know the pain Jesus feels."

When we talk about Jesus, we often speak with grand and powerful imagery. Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Christ who triumphed over death and the devil. Christ the King, seated at the right hand of God. So when we hear Jesus describe himself as a mother hen, it may strike us as a strange choice for a metaphor. Surely, there are better options? More majestic or powerful creatures to choose? As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, God uses God uses plenty of majestic and powerful metaphors in the Old Testament. "Given the number of animals available," she says, "it is curious that Jesus chooses a hen...What about the mighty eagle 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. No wonder some of the chicks decided to go with the fox.”

Now I know there are many of you here who are farmers or who grew up on farms. I didn't – I grew up near some farms, but not on a farm. So you may know about this better than me, but from what I've heard, mother hens are actually extremely protective of their young. They are by no means physically strong or fearsome animals, but they will literally give their lives to protect their babies. When the brood is threatened by a predator, the hen will search out her chicks and hide them beneath her wings – physically putting her own body between the predator and the chicks, which often results in her death. She is no match for the predator, but does all she can to protect her children. She remains a strong, defiant, fearless, and protective mother.

Or, if you prefer a non-barnyard example, consider Harry Potter, the seminal book and movie series for my childhood. As we learn in the first installment, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the evil wizard Voldemort wanted to kill Harry when he was a baby, but was stopped when Harry's mother, Lily, put her body between Voldemort and her son. Determined to get to Harry, Voldemort kills Lily. But when he tries to kill Harry, his curse somehow rebounds back on him sparing the baby and defeating Voldemort. Near the end of the book, Harry asked his wise headmaster, Professor Dumbledore, how this happened. “It was because of your mother,” he said. “She sacrificed herself for you, and that kind of act leaves a mark... This kind of mark cannot be seen. It lives in your very skin...[it's] love, Harry. Love.”

We may want a savior who fights back against the foxes of the world with strength and military might, a strong leader who will deliver us, but instead we have Jesus, our mother hen. But what love Jesus has for us! Jesus, our strong, defiant, fearless, and protective mother who is

ready to die for us on the cross, shielding and saving us from the evils that surround us in an amazing display of sacrificial love. This is the strength of Jesus and the reason we can sing the words of the Psalmist, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”

[Later this morning] [In a few minutes], little Helena _____ will be baptized into the brood of our Mother Hen, Jesus who will imprint her image – claiming her as God’s child forever. The mark of Jesus’ love, the cross, will be left on Helena’s forehead, as it is on ours, and will live in her very skin. There will be many times when Helena strays from Jesus’ brood, just as we do, succumbing to the foxes of the world. But no matter how far we stray, our Mother Hen will call us back under her wings into her warm and loving embrace.

This season of Lent is a time for us to recognize the foxes of the world and to realize that we cannot go it alone. It is a time for us to hear Jesus’ call to come back and nestle under those inviting wings. To understand that we are enough, that we are so loved that Jesus will die for us on the cross to shield us from the evils that surround us. And to know that no matter how far we stray, our Mother Hen will come searching for us ready to protect and embrace us when we hide under her wings.

Thanks be to God.