

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT February 28, 2010 C

Luke 13:31-35

We're presented in today's gospel with an image of God we probably don't often think about, let alone image. It's the image of God Jesus presents when he speaks of gathering the children of Jerusalem together "as a hen gathers her brood under her wings."

We have today and for the next two Sundays, three different images of God worth pondering during this season of Lent, each with implications for our relationship with God and with one another. Today, it's God the Mother Hen who wants to gather her brood under her wings. Next Sunday, we'll hear about God the Patient Gardener, who is willing to delay cutting down a barren fig tree in order to fertilize it and give it the time it needs to bear fruit. Two weeks from today, we'll hear about God the Loving and Forgiving Parent, who has been waiting on his prodigal son to return home. All three of these gospel passages give us more than a hint of who God is and how we might deepen our relationship to God in this season of renewal and conversion through the Good News of Jesus.

Luke tells us that immediately after finding out from the Pharisees that his life is in danger because Herod, 'that fox,' is out to kill him, Jesus makes a very emotional statement filled with maternal concern for the people of Jerusalem. "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."

Luke situates today's gospel right near the end of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. "I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'" Matthew, on the other hand, places it soon after Jesus' entrance into the city on "Palm Sunday." Jesus sees himself in the spirit of the prophets before him. The prophets came in the name of the Lord – and yet, they were rejected and killed by the very people who claimed to have a unique and special covenant relationship with God. Jesus' heart is heavy in using the metaphor of a mother hen because he can't force people he loves to accept him. He loves Jerusalem but laments the city's history of rejecting and killing God's messengers. It is interesting that Jesus chooses a hen from the animal world and not, for instance, the might and power of a lion, when it comes to nurturing and protecting those whom God loves, because the only way a hen can defend her young is to gather its chicks under its wings. A hen is not the first image we have, is it, when we think of leadership or power. I suspect most of us would prefer a feisty rooster to a hen. A rooster knows how to defend himself and the flock, like Herod!

It's hard for some people to imagine Jesus as a mother let alone a hen. My reflection this morning is not an attempt to define Jesus' nature as female. Drawing from tradition and scripture, it's a poetic way of expressing the maternal characteristics found in Jesus' compassion and mercy – and Jesus is the IMAGE of God become human. And it's one of the ways we gain insight into the intimacy and compassion of Christ, as well as the maternal role of leaders within the Christian community, including our own parish family. It's how Jesus experienced God, as

One who seeks to gather ALL humanity under her protective wings, when we grieve, when we're anxious or when we need the warmth of God's accepting presence.

There's a story a farmer tells about the day a fire destroyed his hen house. He had arrived too late to put out the fire. All the animals inside the building died in the disaster. He was going through the smoldering debris when he came upon a hen lying dead near what had been the doorway. Her top feathers were singed brown by the fire and her neck was limp. As the farmer bent down and picked up the dead hen, he was startled. To his surprise, five chicks darted out from under her dead body. The chicks survived because they were insulated by the sheltering wings of the mother hen. In the face of danger, she gathered her chicks under her wings before giving her life to protect and save them.

David Zersen, a Lutheran professor who spent some time teaching in Tanzania, offers some theological insight into this gospel which comes from his daily walk passing the chicken house on his way to and from the campus where he taught. It was not uncommon for him to see during the morning walk nothing but clusters of feathers when a fox attacked by night – and little chicks running around on their own. He writes: “The mother hen represents a new form of power and leadership, the one for others, the servant leader, the one whose extravagant love considers the welfare of her own foremost. Thus the means of survival over against the attack of the wily foxes of this world is provided not by retaliation or brute force, but by gathering the innocent, the victims, into a community in which the love of the mother hen lives on even after her death!”

God our Mother Hen is always more than willing to welcome us into the shelter of her protecting wings. God our Mother Hen invites us anew this Lent to trust that her outstretched arms are strong enough, her wings broad enough, to keep us, her brood, within her loving, forgiving and healing embrace.

Let us pray. (This is a prayer composed by St. Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century.

He was a monk, philosopher, and the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093-1109.

“Jesus, are you not a mother also? Are you not like a mother hen, who gathers her chicks under her wings? Really, Lord Jesus, you are a mother, and you understand those who are in labor. For by the pains of your death many souls have been born to life. Lord, God, you are the great Mother. My soul, run under the wings of Jesus your mother, lament under his feathers. Ask for your wounds to be healed so that you may live again.

Amen.

*Bob Hudak
St. Paul's Church
Greenville, NC*