

Lent 2, February 21, 2016. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland Nigel Taber-Hamilton
Luke 13:31-35

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jerusalem.” I think it’s obvious that Luke loved Jerusalem! He began his gospel there, and ended it there. He mentioned it 90 times in his gospel, while the rest of the New Testament only mentioned it 49 times.

As with the world today, so with the world of Luke’s time, here is a city profoundly rich in history and symbol, dense with expectation, anxiety, and fear. Isaiah (24:23) represents one thread, telling us that Jerusalem is the dwelling place of God, the place where God’s glory shall be revealed. And Micah (3:2) represents another thread, saying that Jerusalem is the place where God is betrayed by those who hate the good and love what is evil.

Whether for good or for evil, nothing that happens in Jerusalem is insignificant. “When Jerusalem obeys God, the world spins peacefully on its axis. When Jerusalem ignores God, the whole planet wobbles.” (Barbara Brown Taylor).

Today’s passage reflects a wobble of epic proportions, a wobble made more ironic because of the Hebrew meaning of that city’s name: “Yeru-shal-ay-im is a compound word from two, base words: “*yarah*,” “to cast;” and “*shalom*,” “peace.” “Jerusalem” literally means “the foundation of peace.” Not “a” foundation; “The” foundation. So Jesus is crying out that *the City of the Foundation of Peace* is, in his day, acting in ways that are diametrically opposed to the identity its name confers on it; Jerusalem is a city of peace that sometimes kills. No, “THE” city of peace that sometimes kills. And in his words we hear the echo of a realization that Jerusalem doesn’t just kill prophets and stone those sent to it; it will likely kill him, too.

I think it’s as a result of this agonizing realization, that his prophetic reflection alternates between denunciation and compassion:

- Jesus’ Denunciation for Jerusalem’s past role as “the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it”
- And immediately following this indictment, a compassionate and agonized plea as he longs to shelter the children of Israel like a mother hen does for her brood. And that plea ends with a heart-wrenching recognition: “but you [Jerusalem] were not willing.”

If Jerusalem had always been – without exception – the city of the “Foundation of Peace” then Jesus’ cry would be absurd; as it is, it’s poignant and predictive: there are plenty of defenseless “chicks” in Jerusalem at the mercy of Herod the Fox and his minions; some have taken to following this fox, placing their mortal and eternal lives in jeopardy.

And across the valley from Herod and the City of the Foundation of Peace, Jesus the mother hen is ‘clucking’ for all he’s worth; but most of those chicks can’t hear, because they can’t recognize that motherly voice. They have forgotten who they are.

Jesus’ metaphor is profoundly moving; it reflects the posture that we humans often take up when we discover that we can’t always protect the people we love. All we can do is open our arms and

hope that they will walk into them.

That's a very vulnerable posture, isn't it? Arms spread wide, exposing the core – the heart – defenseless. But if we mean what we say about love for others, then this is how we stand.

I've often wondered – and I'm not alone in this wondering – why Jesus chose to use a hen and her chicks as a metaphor for himself and the people of God. Metaphors for God include eagles (Exodus), leopards, and lions (Hosea), but nowhere (other than here) is God symbolically described as a chicken!! Seems kinda 'whimpy!'

But Jesus never does what we expect! It's a "world-turned-upside-down" metaphor that fits with his first-being-last-expectation-shattering vision. *Of course he chose a chicken!* How much further can you get from a fox?!!

And that fox/chicken contrast really makes our options clear: we can live by tooth and claw, willing to sacrifice others that we can be monarch of the jungle, or we can live defending the defenseless: fox or chicks, what's it to be?

Jesus answered for himself, knowing the cost when a hen faces off against a fox. If the fox wants the "chicks" he will have to kill the hen first.

Barbara Brown Taylor picks up this metaphor when she reflects on this text. This is, she says, exactly what Herod the Fox does: "He slides up on [the hen] one night in the yard while all the babies are asleep. When her cry wakens them, they scatter. She dies the next day where both foxes and chickens can see her -- wings spread, breast exposed -- without a single chick beneath her feathers. It breaks her heart, but it doesn't change a thing. If you mean what you say, then this is how you stand."