

Who is Jesus?
Mother Hen
Third in Lenten Series

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March 20, 2022

Luke 13:31-35

³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³²He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ³³Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ ³⁴Jerusalem, 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! ³⁵See, your house is left to you. And 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.’”

There is something in the nature of God that cares deeply for the city. Sprinkled throughout scripture, we hear how God chooses to live among city people:

From Psalm 46 - “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High;” to Zechariah’s beautiful prophetic vision of city life as it should be: “Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets.” to the end of Revelation: “I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; and they will be God’s people.’”

God’s passionate love for the city filled with people and God’s desire for human flourishing helps us understand what is happening when Jesus cries over Jerusalem and mourns the violence there. *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!* Jesus’ lament over the city of Jerusalem sadly feels like it has new and poignant resonance this year, because we could put any number of cities under those grief-filled words. Mariupol, Mariupol... Kharkiv, Kharkiv... Kyiv, Kyiv... we can imagine Jesus saying, I see the exploding violence and feel the pain of your people, or closer to home: Minneapolis, Minneapolis, Atlanta, Atlanta, New York, New York.... Philadelphia, Philadelphia.... I see the gun violence, the poverty, the racism that is tearing your people asunder.

Jesus’ lament in the text is specific to Jerusalem, the City of Peace, but given the biblical insistence on the city as the dwelling place for God, we can also imagine Jesus’ grief over each and every city shattered by violence today.

A few chapters back in Luke’s gospel Jesus set his face like flint toward Jerusalem and he is heading there with unwavering determination. Impending doom hangs over it like a storm cloud.

The threat of death is in the air. Others have warned him that trouble might await him in Jerusalem.

Today's gospel lesson opens with Jesus' adversaries the Pharisees, of all people, warning him that things were getting heated, and he best get out of town. "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you," they tell him, but Jesus will not be stopped. "Go tell that fox for me, that I am presently about my work," Jesus says, "today, tomorrow, and the next day, I must be on my way to Jerusalem." So, what is it about Jerusalem that draws the steadfast attention of Jesus? Does Jesus see what we see when we remember the city's history?

Remember what happened to Jeremiah? Jeremiah spoke against the city's corruption and injustices and empty worship practices. He raised his prophetic voice on behalf of God and the priests shouted back at Jeremiah: "You will die for your prophecy!" But the people saved Jeremiah, lowering him by ropes to hide in a cistern.

The prophet Uriah spoke similar words to the city, and soldiers went after Uriah, brought him to the king who struck him with the sword, and they threw his body into the burial place of the common people, a mass grave. Jesus knows what happens in Jerusalem, and how it is a dangerous place for the prophets of God. "You kill your prophets," he laments, "and stone those who are sent to you."

So remembering Jerusalem's history, and considering Jesus' own ministry, as the one who heals, the one who feeds, the one who takes aim at earthy powers and lifts up the love and justice of God, Jesus knows he will not be tolerated for long, and yet, Jesus goes there with steadfast determination.

He imagines himself a Mother Hen covering, sheltering, saving her brood of children under her outstretched wings. "How often have I desired to gather your children together, Jesus says, "as a hen gathers her brood under her wings."

In this evocative, maternal image of a mother hen is the mystery of Jesus' life and death: What is a mother hen against a fox like Herod? What is a hen against the stones that take down prophets? Even though we know how this story will unfold when Jesus finally enters Jerusalem, when he pauses and looks ahead to his own vulnerable death – bare breasted and wings outstretched, I find myself wishing he had chosen a fiercer image.

Couldn't Jesus have chosen a stronger mother to contend with that old fox Herod? Biblical scribes before him used more powerful images for God, and we too might have chosen anyone other than a hen. A roaring lion perhaps ruling with grace and muscular power over her den. Give us a mother bear, the strongest of mammals fiercely protecting her cubs. Or an eagle who could fly lifting us above the danger that lurks below, threatening the city's young. But Jesus imagines himself a mother hen.

Barbara Brown Taylor makes note of this image: “If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus' lament.” If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus' lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world – wings spread, body exposed – but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand.”¹

Just this past week, Yale University's Theologian, Miraslav Volf interviewed one of his former students from their seminary days in Croatia, Fyodor Raychynets who is now a seminary professor and pastor in Ukraine. A year ago, Fyodor lost his wife to COVID, and he has managed to get his young adult daughter to France; his mother too is out of the country.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “As a Hen Gathers Her Brood,” religion-online.org.

But he has chosen to stay. He chairs the Department of Theology at Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary in a satellite town ten kilometers north of Kyiv. The seminary and his small apartment have been bombed, but he has decided to stay and serve those who have suffered the most from the war.

At first he says it was women and children, but so many of them have evacuated that now he serves the elderly who are living in basements, scared to death, hungry and without electricity and water. He's marshalled a group of volunteers who provide what they can by food, water, medicine and hygiene stuff. These days he goes beyond the line, where Ukrainian troops say they can help for his safety. They've told him they will let him through because he is a pastor, but his life is his responsibility now.

Miraslav Wolf had seen that he posted on Facebook serving the military people Communion one night a week, and asked what that means to him now in this moment. Fyodor says he never knows whether they are church people or not, so he tells them he will give them bread saying, "This is the body of Christ broken for you," and they are to say, "Amen." He said, "Yesterday as we were serving them, there was a person who had no religious background whatsoever, but I handed him bread and when he said, "Amen," it was a moving experience. We are just the instrument in this moment and there is a much bigger, invisible presence of God's grace which can do something else we cannot. For me... it is important to make this leap of faith, this step of faith. And to do what the people ask for..."

He goes on, "There is a recurrent prayer for our humanity to be preserved in the midst of unrelenting evil... It is crucial, in the midst of hell, not to lose our humanity, but to preserve it, to show it, and to demonstrate it..." *This is the body of Christ, broken for you.* When asked how his faith has sustained him, Fyodor says he doesn't think of it as strong; he's struggled with his faith as a theologian and pastor. He says the biggest challenge to his faith now is when his friends say,

“Fyodor, run away, save your life, come to the United States, come to Canada, you can be useful somewhere else – get to a safe place. And then he says this: “But then you remember these people and their needs, and you trust the Lord that I will go... you are either afraid to go, or you risk your life and go because someone needs your presence. We say we are from the church, and I think those people will remember that. The war will stop. This madness will end sooner or later, and they will remember there were these crazy people from the church driving around, bringing chocolate, bringing bread, bringing coffee, telling them that we pray for them daily. These are not your relatives; these are people you did not know existed a few days ago but there is this bond with these people. Someone needs your hug. Someone needs your heart.”²

When Jesus likens himself to a Mother Hen, I imagine her today with her wings around Fyodor and his crazy church friends and those elderly Ukrainians barely surviving in the basements. Admitting his own divine vulnerability, what Jesus is saying about his upcoming death is that the people of Jerusalem – in their complex mix of good and evil, the people of the city, the people of the world, are worth dying for.

We are worth his dying for, he says as he surveys the violent landscape before him, longing to gather the human family as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. You know, Jesus’ metaphor may not seem like much over and against the grim news of the day, particularly these days. But if we allow ourselves to live into this image we might experience how that mother hen draws us close to God’s own beating heart.

For Christ himself – who willingly took on the pain and the violence of the world – is there in Kyiv; is here in the streets of Philadelphia where the worst of human suffering can be found. We may

² “A Voice from Kyiv: Fyodor Raychynets/Faithful Presence in the war on Ukraine”, Yale Center for Faith and Culture transcript, 3/15/22.

long for a Savior stronger than a mother hen, while longing for a Savior who would take away all the pain and violence and sin of the world.

It is the great mystery of our faith. Jesus does not take it away. He takes it on. He takes it upon his body. And just like a hen, with her chicks under her wings – protective, exposed, vulnerable, Jesus stretches out holy wings for us upon the cross. All he asks of us is that we might find shelter under those wings, and perhaps strength to be those crazy church people serving others in need of that same shelter.

AMEN.