

Foxes and Hens **March 13, 2022**

One warm evening, a wise hen flew into a tree to roost. As she settled onto the branch, she looked down to find a fox ambling up to the tree where she was resting.

The fox called up excitedly, "Have you heard the wonderful news?"

"What news?" asked the hen very calmly and evenly.

The fox replied, "All the animals have agreed to forget their differences and live in peace and friendship from now on. I can't wait to embrace you! Come down, dear friend, and let us celebrate the joyful event."

"That is wonderful news," said the hen. "I delighted to hear it..." She trailed off absent-mindedly, and stretching up on tiptoes, seemed to be looking at something far off in the distance.

"What is it you see?" asked the fox a little anxiously.

"Why, it looks to me like a couple of dogs coming this way. They must have heard the good news!"

The fox did not wait to hear more. He took off in a run.

"Wait," cried the hen. "Why are you running? The dogs are friends of ours now!"

"Yes," called the fox and he ran away. "But I'm guessing they haven't heard the good news yet!"

The hen smiled and went to sleep.

"The Hen and the Fox," Fables of Aesop, July 5, 2016. <https://fablesofaesop.com/hen-fox.html>

This is one of Aesop's Fables called, "The Hen and the Fox." It speaks to our views of these two different animals. Foxes are known to be smart and cunning but not exactly trustworthy. They are sneaky and predatorial, always looking out for themselves and for some easy prey. Hens, on the other hand, are protective and cautious and (depending on the fable) either pretty smart themselves or easily duped.

These sentiments or even biases that we have about these creatures are not new. Foxes have been seen as sneaky and untrustworthy for centuries, even going back to the time of Jesus. And we hear that in Jesus' proclamation today.

A few Pharisees are looking out for Jesus, and they warn the teacher that Herod, the ruler, has it out for Jesus' life. This revelation prompts Jesus to comment to the crowd around him, "Go and tell that fox, 'I'm not going anywhere. I've got work to do until it is finished on the third day'" (a reference there to the resurrection).

Jesus is calling Herod sneaky and predatorial, but there's a little more to the insult. Herod is a ruler, and so a lion would be a fitting comparison. By calling Herod a fox, Jesus is pointing out that Herod isn't a real king. He's a wannabe, a scavenger. He is a puppet for the Roman authorities.

If Herod is a fox, then what is Jesus? Jesus, as the King of kings and Lord of lords, could say, “I am an eagle.” That would be a fitting metaphor. After all, Isaiah talked about eagles’ wings; there are numerous references in the psalms to God protecting us with his wings. The symbol of the Roman Empire was the eagle; that was the standard carried into battle.

But instead, Jesus goes for a more humble image: “I am a mother hen. How I long to gather up the wayward people of Jerusalem like a mother hen collects her chicks under her wings.” We hear the familiar quality of protectiveness we expect in a hen.

Of course, hens are not regal animals, and they’re not exactly strong animals. I’ve raised chickens; I’ll be the first one to tell you that they are at the bottom of the food chain. With our chickens, we had to constantly be on the lookout for foxes or raccoons or hawks finding ways into our chicken run and coop. Chickens are vulnerable animals.

And I think that’s part of the point Jesus is making. He didn’t come as a hawk or eagle to hunt foxes; he came to gather his children in a loving, protective, and even vulnerable way.

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest, had this to say about Jesus in one of her sermons: “Jesus won’t be king of the jungle in this or any other story.

What he will be is a mother hen,
who stands between the chicks
and those who mean to do them harm.
She has no fangs,
no claws,
no rippling muscles.

All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body.”

Barbara Brown Taylor, “As a Hen Gathers Her Brood,” *Christian Century*, February 26, 1986, 201.

If that weren’t enough, in addition to Jesus imagining himself as a prey animal, he also deliberately chooses a feminine image for himself and thus for God.

We often talk about God using male language: almighty Father, heavenly King. But of course, we know rationally that God is neither solely male or female; we believe that God is both masculine and feminine. And since our prayers and our hymns rely pretty heavily on masculine imagery, it’s helpful to intentionally remind ourselves that God is as much a loving mother as a mighty father.

It’s also fitting that we talk about this during March, Women’s History Month, and in particular, on Girl Scout Sunday. There can be a danger in using solely masculine pronouns for God, which is that we might mistakenly equate power and might with maleness. Jesus reminds us that this is not the case: his power is realized in his mothering love.

And what a powerful love it is. There is so much love, that there is a sense of tragedy here, isn’t there? This is a lament, that Jesus’ children will not come into the loving embrace of their mother’s arms.

This week, Phoebe shared an experience from her life with me, and she gave me permission to share it with you. Phoebe and her family at one point owned a bantam hen, which I learned are fantastic mothers. To quote Phoebe, they can incubate and hatch a rock.

At one point, Phoebe received a donation of quail eggs from a group that was trying to help repopulate the area with quail, with the request to incubate these eggs, and once the chicks hatched, to release them into the wild.

Well, this bantam hen sat on these tiny quail eggs. In due time, they hatched into cute little puff balls. And then, after they had been raised and were self-sufficient, Phoebe and her family opened up the chicken run, and the quails scattered. They were wild, after all. But the look on the mother bantam hen's face, as she ran around and tried to gather these little quail chicks, was just heart-breaking. Her babies were running away, and there was nothing the mother could do to bring them back.

Imagine that anguish. That sense of loss and helplessness. That resonates with me this week. I imagine God feeling that anguish. As we watch the news and witness the horrors of war, and we wonder about the future and pray for peace, I imagine God lamenting, "How I wish I could gather you into the safety of my wings, so that you know how much you are loved."

That is the image we hear of Jesus this week, and by extension, the image we have of God. A mother hen – protective, vulnerable, feminine, and lamenting with us. And while we do the work, while we pray, while we support the people of Ukraine as we can, while we live out our faith, let us not forget to always return to the shelter of our mother's wings.

I'll close with hymn lyrics from the Lutheran tradition called "Thy Holy Wings," written by Carolina Sandell.

Thy holy wings, O Savior,
spread gently over me,
and let me rest securely
through good and ill in thee.
Oh, be my strength and portion,
my rock and hiding place,
and let my ev'ry moment
be lived within thy grace.

Oh, let me nestle near thee,
within thy downy breast
where I will find sweet comfort
and peace within thy nest.
Oh, close thy wings around me
and keep me safely there,
for I am but a newborn
and need thy tender care.

Caroline Sandell, "Thy Holy Wings," trans. Gracia Grindal, Augsburg Fortress, © 2006, 1865.

Amen.

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