

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Burt L. Burleson

"The Fox and the Hen"

Luke 13: 31-35

March 7, 2004

Are there places that you love? Is there any place on this planet that gets your heart racing and blood pumping, or a place that has your devotion? Maybe it's because of the people there or the memories? Or maybe your story just keeps pivoting in that place?

That's the case with Luke's story of Jesus. Luke mentions Jerusalem more than any other New Testament writer... 90 times in his gospel. The rest of the New Testament writers all totaled only mentioned that city 49 times.

Luke's gospel begins in Jerusalem at the temple, where old Zechariah has a talk with the angel about the birth of his son John the Baptist. Luke ends the gospel in Jerusalem at the temple with the disciples "praising God."

Jerusalem is key for Luke.

It's a place for him and for sure many others that is...

so full of history and hope,

so full of expectation and promise and revelation.

And yet it's also the place of memories... wonderful and painful stories. Jerusalem has been prone to killing her messengers when she didn't like the message. There are reminders everywhere of glory and grime. It's a pivotal place for Luke... and for Jesus.

Jesus loves Jerusalem... and the people who live there. Our gospel reading for today is only one of the times when Jesus gets all choked up just thinking about them. He's being warned in this text, by some Pharisees no less, to stay away but Luke has already told us that Jesus had already set his sights on the city. Back in chapter nine, "**As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely (resolutely) set out for Jerusalem. (v 51)**"

It's one of those headline verses that frame things so that the rest of the narrative is a kind of Captains Log of the Journey to Jerusalem... They're traveling from town to village, "**Teaching,**" says Luke, "**As he made his way to Jerusalem. (13:22)**"

Jesus loves Jerusalem and he has important work to do there, even if Herod the Fox is waiting for him. Yes, Jesus is name-calling and "fox" is appropriate for Herod.

The fox was... the slyest, most destructive, and the laziest animal.

Jesus aptly describes Herod Antipas, who is a fox and also a real "son of a fox." Herod the Great was his father and both are worthless, deceitful, destructive foxes. The son Herod is going to succeed where his father failed when Jesus was a baby. He's going to eliminate Jesus. Jesus knows this by now so he says, "**Surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem! (v33b).**" Jerusalem, this city he loves, will ultimately reject him.

He says this, according to tradition, with Jerusalem in sight. He's just across the Kidron Valley on the Western slope of the Mount of Olives. That's where he gets the lump in his throat when he talks about Jerusalem. "**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you. You bite the very hand that feeds you. How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gather her chicks**

under her wings."

At first glance it's a warm and wonderful image, isn't it. So feminine and soft. You can just see these little, helpless chicks, squeaking and chirping, all nestled in under mother's soft feathers and steady beating heart.

For a chick, there's nothing better. I mean, underneath mother's wings you just forget all your cares. It's a place where you can relax.

You don't have to worry about someone stepping on you.

It's a place of protection.

You're sheltered there from all the elements.

You do have to be willing to snuggle up next to your brother and sister chicks but that's just part of the pleasure or at least that's the plan. It's a place of closeness. What an intimate and warm thing for Jesus to say. *"There have been so many times, I'd just like to draw you all into this cozy, close place, where we'd all just be together."*

And here are some of the saddest words in all of scripture. **"But you were not willing."** Always in the biblical story, there is this freedom. The relationship is never forced... there's no such thing. God always offers more than one option. We're free.

Free to enjoy God's garden

or free to eat from even that tree that God says no to.

Free to get in the boat with Noah

or free to try our luck swimming.

Free to say yes

or no... "I'm in" or "I'm out."

Free to get up close to Jesus, like a chick to a hen, or not to. **"You were not willing."** Jesus says, *"You didn't want it."*

And before you drop your jaw in amazement that anyone would pass on an invitation like this one, think again about the image and all the images in play. Given the animals available, I find it interesting that Jesus chooses a hen. A hen????

He could have referred to the mighty eagle... that's a good Old Testament image.

Or why not Hosea's lightening fast leopard?

Or even better, that roaring Lion of Judah.

Do you think he'd have drawn more of a crowd if he invited cubs to come to the side of a great lion, instead of inviting them to be chicks with a mother hen. Jesus says, he's like a mother hen.

Mother hens (George Stokes once told me) have a special cluck that they make... and when they make that noise all their baby chicks come running and they nestle in under mom as if they were completely safe.

We know better or at least we would had we been raised on a farm. Mother hens mean well, they'd do anything for their chicks... but they're no match for a fox. And little chicks???? they're delicacies to a fox.

No wonder Jesus is so anxious to bring us all in around him. *"I wanted to gather you in so many times," says Jesus, "Just cluck you in and hide under my wing but you won't come."*

They don't come. Instead, some of the chicks have taken to following the fox around, what better way to survive, pretend you're a fox. (B. Taylor) And some of us

know what that's all about. We don't like the vulnerability of being a chick.... it's too dependent... too scary. So we learn to act like a fox.

We get craftier and prowl around and growl a bit.

We position ourselves with the powerful.

We look as "foxy" as we can.

Of course, the problem is, you're still a chick and in the end, you're still the fox's meal. And in the meantime, you've forgotten what you are and whose you are.

I think this is a part of the reason why we haven't been so into Lent. Lent is a season of following Jesus into dangerous places, places where there are no fox free guarantees. We don't like this notion of being vulnerable and following Jesus who has picked up his cross and invites us to pick up ours.

But this is the invitation... We're promised life, but we have trouble believing it can come through vulnerability. Hens don't always survive in the barnyard and so we're not so sure we want to be so near the hen when the fox comes hunting.

Today in Palestine, there is a chapel called the Domus Flevit that sits in the very spot where Jesus is thought to have uttered these words and grieved over Jerusalem... not once but on two separate occasions.

Barbara Brown Taylor, who is the finest preacher I know of anywhere, has been there and she describes it.

"Inside the chapel, the altar is centered before a high arched window that looks out over the city. Iron grillwork divides the view into sections, so that on a sunny day the effect is that of a stained-glass window. The difference is that this subject is alive. It is not some artist's rendering of the holy city but the city itself, with the Dome of the Rock in the bottom left corner and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the middle. Two-thirds of the view is the cloudless sky above the city, which the grillwork turns into a quilt of blue squares. (Brown wonders) Perhaps this is where the heavenly Jerusalem hovers over the earthly one, until the time comes for the two to meet?"

Down below, on the front of the altar, is a picture of what never happened in that city. It is a mosaic medallion of a white hen with a golden halo around her head. Her red comb resembles a crown, and her wings are spread wide to shelter the pale yellow chicks that crowd around her feet. There are seven of them, with black dots for eyes and orange dots for beaks. They look happy to be there. The hen looks ready to spit fire if anyone comes near her babies.

The medallion is rimmed with red words in Latin. Translated into English they read, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather you children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" The last phrase is set outside the circle, in a pool of red underneath the chicks' feet: 'You were not willing'."

It's a good picture of Jesus... especially during this Lenten season with the cross looming large on the horizon. Jesus isn't poised like some King of the Jungle. That's the wrong picture. Jesus, rather, stands like a mother hen between the chicks and all who mean to do them harm.

She isn't all that intimidating. Her clucking doesn't scare anyone. She has no sharp teeth, no weapons. **"All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body (Taylor)."**

That's the picture. The vulnerable posture... wings spread and breast exposed. Again, I can't resist the words of Reverend Taylor. **"If the fox wants her chicks, he will have to kill her first. Which he does, as it turns out. He slides up on her 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."**

You know it broke her heart. You know it did. Even those chicks who initially gathered are gone now. She is alone but love keeps her there. Love, so amazing, so divine... keeps her there, giving her life for her chicks because they belong to her. Every last one of them.

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This sermon was significantly impacted and shaped by Barbara Brown Taylor's article, "As a hen gathers her brood," Christian Century, Feb. 25, 1998