

The God of Promises

Psalm 27; Luke 13:31-35

The Reverend Jane Willan

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Did you know that in Connecticut, you can rent a chicken?

Here is what an organization called Rent-A-Hen LLC in Killingworth, CT has to say:

"We facilitate our customers in the experience of enjoying egg laying hens at their residence with low cost and easy maintenance. Our hens not only provide wonderful eggs but are excellent domesticated pets. All rental packages include:

One portable chicken coop, Delivery and set up, Three hens, Feed & Bedding for a month, Water and feed containers, Healthy Hen Kit, Instructions on how to keep the chickens happy."

Raising chickens has become trendy. People you would never expect to, are now keeping chickens. My friends who have chickens talk on about the joy of daily fresh eggs. But I think that is a bit lame when a dozen eggs are available for less than three dollars at any grocery.

I think that it is something else instead. I talked with a few chicken friends and asked them "why?" Well, apparently, chickens have distinct personalities. They are entertaining. They are very intelligent, especially hens. And they display empathy. They are beautifully colorful with brilliant hues and patterns in their feathers. Chickens are social with other animals, and with children.

Chicken therapy has also been used with great success in people with anxiety, depression and loneliness. The use of the chickens, especially hens, in therapy has had success. Chickens. Who knew?

Jesus uses a compelling metaphor today. He compares his feelings about the people of Jerusalem to a mother hen with a flock of little chicks. And in doing so, he laments his deep love of the people of Jerusalem. He wishes he could protect them like a mother protects her young.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings...." Jesus wept that day as he looked over Jerusalem because he cared for the people of Jerusalem. He would gladly have carried them to a safe place if he could have.

Perhaps we can relate to his anguish. We are sorrowing over a country we would like to save and cannot. Instead of gathered under the protective care of Christ, we are a society where so many are scattered, distracted, unable to know the gift of God's love. We helplessly watch the events in Ukraine grow more horrifying and heartbreaking with each day. If only everyone could be gathered under the protective wing of Christ's love.

Perhaps in the same way that we weep over the devastating images from Ukraine, Jesus wept over Jerusalem. He would gladly have carried them to a safe place if they would let him. Barbara Brown Taylor writes this, "Jesus...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. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first. Jesus came to be a suffering servant and live a life of self-sacrifice. And he calls us to that life as well."

The image of the mother hen is not just about comfort and protection, it is about service and sacrifice, courage and fearless action.

In 1937, there was a man named Chiune Sugihara. Sugihara was the Japanese ambassador to Lithuania. Early one morning, a huge crowd of people gathered outside his home. They were Jewish refugees who had made their way across treacherous terrain from Poland, desperately seeking his help. They wanted Japanese visas, which would enable them to flee Eastern Europe and the Nazis.

Three times Sugihara wired Tokyo for permission to provide the visas; three times he was rejected. He had to choose between his career and livelihood as an ambassador and people's lives. He chose the latter. He dared to disobey orders. For twenty-eight days he wrote visas by hand, barely sleeping or eating. Recalled to Berlin, he was still writing visas and shoving them through the train windows into the hands of the Jewish refugees who ran alongside. Ultimately, he saved six thousand lives.

Sugihara was not only a courageous Japanese; he was also a committed Christian. He spent his remaining days in Japan, working odd jobs. When his story was finally told, his son was asked, "How did your father feel about his choice?" The young man replied, "My father's life was fulfilled. When God needed him to do the right thing, he was available to do it."

That is the message of the Gospel, isn't it? Service and sacrifice, courage and fearless action in the face of power and dominance. Holding your ground even while afraid and in fear of violence. Like the mother hen covering her chick with her wings while staring down a predatory hawk or a stalking fox.

This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. John 13:15

In the text today, Jesus refers to not just the powerful image of the mother hen, but also the treacherous fox-- Herod. What a combination—a hen and a fox. There is an old proverb that warns, "The fox is in charge of the henhouse." Which means someone with bad intentions. Herod certainly had bad intentions. The reading starts off with the Pharisees warning Jesus that Herod wanted to kill him.

A fox is characterized by its cunning and slyness. A fox will prey on the young of others. A fox will make a meal out of a hen and her chicks. Herod was just as ruthless and violent. Remember what he did to John the Baptist. Herod is no more than a first century Vladimir Putin. Brutal and entirely self-serving.

Remember that the siege of Jerusalem happened in the year 70 CE only about ten years before the Gospel of Luke was written. So when Luke wrote these words, he had witnessed the Roman army capturing the city of Jerusalem and destroying both the city and its Temple. Is it any wonder that Jesus says, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings...."

Luke probably writes this as his own lament. As his own sorrow for the people. But he is also reminding his readers that for the people of Israel, God remains their protection and strength against the foxes of the world. That the God of Abraham had been their protector all along.

Psalm 57 - *In the shadow of thy wings I will take refuge till the storms of destruction pass by.*

Psalm 91- *He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.*

Psalm 61:4 - *Oh to be safe under the shelter of thy wings.*

Psalm 63:7 - *In the shadow of thy wings I sing for joy.*

And from Deuteronomy -

*As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young;
as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft*

These verses from the Hebrew Scriptures speak of the protective wings of God. They are ancient scripts that Jesus had read and heard all of his life. So when Jesus expressed his desire to comfort Jerusalem he used an image widely recognized, "I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings."

But Luke tells us that Jesus' desires go unfulfilled for Jerusalem was "unwilling," Jesus said, to receive the shelter he offered. Which takes the metaphor to completion because the mother hen does not go around gathering up her chicks. The chicks must run to her. As we must run to God.

A pastor tells this story which I read in Ministry Magazine:

The chicks were only a few days old when the weather forecaster predicted a hard freeze. We threw extra hay in the barn, shut all the windows and doors, and watched as the horses snuggled together in their cozy stalls. The chickens all nested for the evening in their chicken house. The hen and her brood settled in their soft nest. As we could have predicted, those curious little chicks would not stay under her. She went all through the routine, fluff and rearranged several times, but heads continued popping out. We left for the night, wondering if the hen would ever get a wink of sleep because of these 14 rebellious chicks.

When we opened the farm doors the next morning, the mother hen's usual patience gave way to panic. With agitation and frenzy, she cackled incessantly. Strewn around her were eight frozen dead chicks. The other six were huddled together deep under her feathers, never moving. Paralyzed, I surveyed the scene. All I could see were dead chicks. Poor mother hen! She had tried so hard to keep those chicks safe, warm, and protected, but whatever it was that attracted their attention, flies on the wall, the flicker of the barn lights, or just plain curiosity as to what's out there in the big world it was more of a temptation to them to pursue these things than staying safe and secure under her warm wings.

God will keep us close, under his protective wings. But God's love is freely offered. We must go to God, ask for God's help, open ourselves to God's presence. As young chicks seek out the hen for protection. In the same way, we must seek out God.

It is like the old hymn, *Under His Wings, I Am Abiding*

Under His wings I am safely abiding.

Tho' the night deepens, and tempests are wild,

Still I can trust him; I know he will keep me.

He has redeemed me and I am His Child.

Under His wings, under his wings, who from his love can sever?

Under his wings my soul shall abide, Safely abide forever.

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Rev. Jane apologizes, but she preaches from her notes, - so her sermons may not translate as well into a printed, document format. However, she loves to discuss her sermons, - so feel free to email her with any thoughts or questions!