

Hens, Foxes and Ukraine—Luke 13: 31-35
March 13, 2022- 2nd Transfiguration Sunday

“If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus’ lament.” That’s what American Episcopal preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor says about this scripture. “If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus’ lament.” Do you or have you loved someone you could not protect—a very sick child, an addicted friend, someone with untreated schizophrenia? With Black History Month fresh in my mind, I thought of what Black parents often refer to as “the talk”. This is the conversation Black parents have with their kids, particularly their sons, about how they should deal with the police if they encounter them. It is a hard talk, a sad talk. And the stakes are really high, the stakes are life and death.¹ I imagine myself giving my children that talk, the sense of powerlessness, fear, and sadness I would feel. How Jesus longs to gather Jerusalem, like her children, like a mother hen gathers her brood of chicks under her wings. It matters not that Jerusalem wants to kill him, he will not let that stop him from loving in the face of their fear, from protecting them from themselves. As Brown Taylor says, “All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them.”²

Jerusalem—the centre of civic and religious power, the killer of prophets, of truth tellers won’t be gathered, won’t walk into the open arms of love. Power that won’t subject itself to love needs to be defended, it is fearful, it sees threats lurking around every corner. Jesus knows what he’s walking into. Jesus knows the love of power kills; we all know that. The last few weeks in Ukraine show us that. Yemen shows us that, Palestine shows us that, China and the Uighyrs shows us that. The states of Texas and Idaho show us that. They show us that you can’t love power and love Jesus. In the last two weeks these states supposedly driven by Christian values have passed or are in the process of passing evil, sinful legislation (those are words I hardly ever use) that will possibly remove children from their homes and prosecute parents of trans children involved in gender affirming treatments, treatments that would help children live into their true gender identities. It is the move of a Christianity rooted in the love of power, a Christianity that is ashamed of their hen Messiah.

I admit I look at Ukraine and elsewhere, I read about Texas and Idaho and I’m not all that crazy about a hen Messiah either. Brown Taylor asks, “How do you like that image of God? If you are like me, it is fine in terms of comfort, but in terms of protection it leaves something to be desired.”³ A hen, really Jesus? In the face of all we see. Couldn’t God be more like that fox, Herod? How about a rooster at least? A rooster will defend

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/28/882383372/a-black-mother-reflects-on-giving-her-3-sons-the-talk-again-and-again>

² As quoted in a sermon by Stephen Fearing found at <http://www.stephenmfearing.com/sermons-2//cultivating-courage-letting-go-of-complicity-luke-1331-35-march-17-2019>

³ As quoted in a sermon by Dr. Randy Hyde found at <https://sermonwriter.com/sermons/new-testament-luke-1331-35-in-his-own-time-hyde/>

its territory and protect its brood to the bitter end with all the ferocity it can muster. A hen will cower down, spread out her wings, protect her young as best she can, but sit vulnerably while the fox attacks.⁴ Yet, this is the image Jesus chooses.

He won't engage Herod and the other powers in Jerusalem on their terms. In fact, "engage" is even the wrong word. Jesus isn't responding or reacting to Herod's power. He's just being who he is—a healer, a gatherer of people, a nurturer. The awful truth is that it will lead to his death. As Brown Taylor says, "...this is the most vulnerable posture in the world—wings spread, breast exposed—but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand. . . . 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. If the fox wants them, 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. It breaks her heart . . . but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand."⁵

Will you choose the way of the fox or the way of the hen? Jesus says, "this is who I am, who will you be?" There is no doubt that the agenda of the world is often dictated by the Herods, the foxes, an agenda driven by coercive power, greed, and ego. But will we let that be our agenda. The choice is ours, it's for any of us who exercise power in various settings. It's Vladimir Putin's choice and he has made it. How do we respond as people of faith to this modern-day Herod and his invasion of Ukraine? Do we go further than we already have? Direct military involvement, planes in the air, boots on the ground? We all have varying responses, some of us don't know, some of us see it as a moral imperative to protect lives, some of us are worried about nuclear retaliations, some of us never see violence as the answer. These are the questions with which we're faced when Herod sets the agenda, we wind up engaging Herod on his terms. The answers inevitably come with compromise, they never completely reflect the all-encompassing, redeeming love of God that breaks down all barriers, end all divisions. But this is the world in which we live as long as Herods and foxes rule, as long as the love of power is chosen over and against the power of love.

The grace of this scripture is to show us a different way that doesn't put us in a position where we must ask such impossibly difficult questions. The way of Jesus is the way of healing, of vulnerable love, of gathering people together in community. It eschews behaviours and ways of being that divide. The way of Jesus moves us toward unity, with each other and creation and thus union with God. It is the way of the universe. Lent asks us what we need to die to in order to choose the hen over the fox as our way

⁴ <https://sermonwriter.com/sermons/new-testament-luke-1331-35-in-his-own-time-hyde/>

⁵ <http://www.stephenmfearing.com/sermons-2//cultivating-courage-letting-go-of-complicity-luke-1331-35-march-17-2019>

of being and moving in the world. Mostly I would say it's fear, but we each need to discern for ourselves.

This Jesus of ours is not a solution to our problems, this hen of a Messiah/Teacher gets mauled by the foxes, by those who love power. This Jesus of ours leads us in a way of being in the world, an unflinching commitment to vulnerable, sacrificial love, to God. A way of being that is firm in the power of love. A power that shelters and nurtures all who will come under her wings. Our Lenten journey continues. Keep going toward Jerusalem. It's not easy, death most certainly awaits, but so does resurrection.