Jesus as Our Mother Hen

Second Sunday in Lent (C) || March 16, 2025 || 9:30 am St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA || Genesis 15:1-12,17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35|| The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

I am so glad that we can be together on this warm and misty morning. Whatever effort you required to be here with us – thank God for this time of study, prayer, singing and regrounding ourselves in the profound and shared truths offered to us in scripture. It feels increasingly important to practice what God preaches, and perhaps more difficult or distracting day to day to remember our own belovedness. Whatever challenges or news stories or anxieties that competed with your love of and connection to God this week, I invite you to leave them on the doorstep and to be assured that you are in the right place, at the exact right time – whether you made it here in person, or are with us on-line, it is good to be together – particularly on a day when we get to mull over a wonderful and perhaps novel facet of Jesus' ministry and love for us.

This morning, on our second Sunday of Lent, we are treated to a compound gospel, with two seemingly unrelated passages connected. At first we have a group of pharisees warning Jesus that Herod is out to kill him (we know from elsewhere in scripture that Herod is very worried that Jesus is John the Baptist come back to life.)

So, Herod is anxious and sends out some pharisees to see whether his nightmare has come true. Somewhere in their travels, these emissaries, loyal to Herrod, change their tune and express concern about Jesus, warning him that he should flee to outrun Herrod's wrath. A pretty terrific Lenten reminder that all Pharisees are not one thing. Here they are a more nuanced group. Those of us who have been watching episodes of the show The Chosen are enjoying spending time with Nicodemus, a revered pharisee, a deeply spiritual and religious man, who is a member of the Sanhedran and is eventually moved by Jesus' teaching and ministry. Open invite if you find yourselves with time, some curiosity and enthusiasm for our potluck gatherings –we'll keep up the 6pm dinner and a show theme throughout Lent.

Jesus is undeterred by the pharisees warming, and is either not afraid of Herrod, or is actively taunting him. Jesus affirms that he will continue his ministry, and then the tone of this passage changes dramatically. Jesus laments the fact that the people have failed to heed the warnings and teaching of prophets and scholars, and then he offers this beautiful simile wishing that he could be a mother hen gathering everyone into his protective care.

Did any of you grow up with chickens or do you have chickens now? I grew up with chickens, so with some lived experience and authority, I'm available to say that chickens are not among God's most intelligent creatures. Those of you who know about chickens can attest that they seem to operate on autopilot MOST of the time. Their movements seem wrote and they are neither overly curious or industrious.

We even have idioms that reflect the silliness of chickens – if someone is terribly disorganized and not making progress we say they are "running around like a chicken with its head cut off".

Here is something to know about these modestly equipped creatures of God. They have a primal imprint mechanism. The first thing that they see, and that nourishes them upon their hatching, becomes essentially their parent – the person or animal they turn to for their sustenance and protection. This imprinted attachment is extraordinary and universal.

The second thing to know about chickens is that they are incredibly vulnerable, with few defenses at their disposal. They can't fly, they can't eject their feathers if they are in the mouth of a predator. What they do have is keen eye sight and an innate sense of community. They can peck and scratch a predator, but they tire very easily. They require a pretty narrow range of temperatures to live and their feathers are only waterproof to a point. Once they are soaking wet, they get weighed down and can freeze or they end up in a stupor if their body temperature drops below a certain point. They are also vulnerable to drowning if they are not sheltered in rainstorms.

When a literal fox gets in the henhouse, the place becomes mayhem. The squawking is deafening, and if you look at what is happening, hens stand up straight, fluff out their feathers, and gather their chicks under their wings as protection. It is extraordinary to watch this reflexive action. And, in the squawking hopefully someone or some other animal can come to their rescue.

When Jesus laments and wishes that he could be our mother hen, I think of both this primal reflexive act of fluffing up his feathers and gathering each of us to himself, to keep us safe and warm, and this extraordinary imprinting behavior. Imagine if each of us truly looked to Jesus for our comfort and sustenance, and experienced being gathered under his protective wing. We'd be spared the chicken with our heads cut off routine when any fox or predator or threat arrived on our shared horizon.

But Jesus is lamenting the fact that people have not heeded his lessons, and have continued to spurn his and any preceding prophet's teachings. The people of Jerusalem are in a pickle, and these days, I think we may be able to relate.

Whether you would describe what is underway in Washington, as a fox in the henhouse, or the resident of the White House as a sly fox with a plan to fix and make things better, the chaos and uncertainty for our siblings who are doing public service as government employees or are among the tens of millions of people who rely on government programs as their lifelines is not of God. The fear and uncertainty that is now a daily occurrence is the definition of sinful, as it creates a barrier and distraction from things holy and shared. These announced program changes, then announced program reversions demand attention on things earthly.

Some of the press coverage is exaggerated or hyperbole, aimed at grabbing eye balls and our attention. One of my suggested Lenten practices is to become a no gossip zone – so I'm continuing to boycott the screaming headlines that often begin with "WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF...." - I've lost my appetite for hypotheticals.

I'm specifically fussed at the speeches and the pronouncements seemingly made with little study, thought or consideration to the human cost and consequences. The mass firings without evaluation or cause, other than to save money in the short run.

You may know that I've enhanced my own Lenten practice by spending my lunchtime reminding folks of our scriptural mandate from Micah: "
And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God"

I'm praying and I'm investing my time in support of our earthly and human actions lining up with God's expectations.

None of the chaos created by bold and sweeping statements or mass federal worker firings translates as Humble or Just or, frankly Merciful....By yesterday, I was eager to seek spiritual and intellectual shelter here with you. Again, I am grateful to each of you who have joined us, and to be able to share this beautiful image of Jesus who gathers us as a protective mother hen. Jesus, God's word incarnate, who used his inestimable power to heal and teach and spread love as an illumination to every heart or dark corner of the world that listens.

I do not often prescribe a Sunday scriptural re-read, but I found this morning's collect powerful, appropriate and right on point for the current state of our world. I'll close by praying

it again, and if you hear it differently, or it strikes your heart in a way that feels meaningful, I hope that you will use it during the coming week, as a reminder, as solace and perhaps even as a way to focus yourself on the idea of imprinting on Jesus and reflecting on what God requires of each of us.

Let us pray:

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen+*