

2nd Sunday of Lent

Sermon 2.21.16

Scripture: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-19

Luke 13:31-35

There's a hen in the fox-house. That's what Jesus seems to have believed anyway, believed about himself: there's a hen in the fox-house.

Clever, right? Even heart-warming. But you've got to admit, once you think about it for a while, it doesn't inspire much confidence. I mean, that hen doesn't stand a chance.

As for her chicks...?

A story circulating on the Internet tells of an event reported in *National Geographic Magazine* in the late 80s—a hen and her chicks caught in fire at Yellowstone National Park. The meme reads, "...forest rangers began their trek up a mountain to assess the inferno's damage. One ranger found a bird literally petrified in ashes, perched statuesquely on the ground at the base of a tree. Somewhat sickened by the eerie sight, he knocked over the bird with a stick.

"When he struck it, three tiny chicks scurried from under their dead mother's wings. The loving mother, keenly aware of impending disaster, had carried her offspring to the base of the tree and had gathered them under her wings, instinctively knowing that the toxic smoke would rise. She could have flown to safety, but had refused to abandon her babies.

"When the blaze had arrived and the heat had scorched her small body, the mother had remained steadfast. Because she had been willing to die, so those under the cover of her wings would live."

In this version of the story, the introduction notes it as providing "a penetrating picture of God's wings."

The problem is that the story isn't true. Or at least it's a problem for me. *National Geographic* never published it and no one in Yellowstone National Park ever reported it. The truth-tracking website Snopes says, "Nope."

As for what originally provoked the image of a brooding hen in the first place, some Pharisees had come to Jesus to warn him that Herod wanted to kill him, that he should get away from this region which fell within Herod's rule and reach.

This means that we're not in Jerusalem yet, and not even heading toward Jerusalem yet; and this means that we've traveled back in time.

With the beginning of Lent we see Jesus turning toward Jerusalem, his leaving behind his itinerant ministry throughout the region and heading more deliberately toward the city that, by his own description, “kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.” This, he seems to have known, is where he’d be killed; and this, he seems to have known, is how things would end for him.

Therefore, with this move, the Church begins its own journey to the cross, a season of six weeks set aside for some process of preparation—whatever such a thing might look like or however such preparation might play out. People, and congregations, and traditions have developed all sorts of ways by which Lent might be honored, preparing us for the mystery and the horror and the hope of the cross. But it usually begins with Jesus making this turn toward Jerusalem, with the Church telling once again of Jesus making this turn.

But now we’re back in time. Now we’ve moved back a few days, or weeks, or months—back to when Jesus was yet bringing good news to the poor of the larger region, and bringing hope of release the captives of greater Galilee. The mission he was on was both urgent and meandering, both pointed and itinerant. It would reach its goal—that is, Jerusalem; that is, the cross. But for now there was no rush. No, for now was about casting out demons and performing cures.

It’s odd, perhaps, that Jesus was so confident he wouldn’t be killed outside Jerusalem. (And this makes it odder still that he would eventually go to Jerusalem.) But so he was, therefore dispatching those Pharisees back to Herod to tell him in essence, “Not so fast.”

For what it’s worth, this isn’t the same Herod who, according to Matthew, already tried to kill Jesus. That was this Herod’s father, tetrarch back when Jesus was a baby in Bethlehem. It was this Herod’s father who purportedly had all the boys under the age of two killed—all for fear of this one storied baby, Jesus, who was promised to become king of the Jews (and thus unseating Herod). The Herod now being said to want to kill Jesus was that earlier Herod’s son. A different person, but inheritor of the same title and the same motivations, this Herod was as frustrated and frightened, as crazy and brutal, as the last.

So, it’s little surprise that a Herod, *any* Herod, would want to kill Jesus—which is likely why Jesus seems unruffled by this news. What is a surprise (perhaps) is that it was Pharisees who sought Jesus out to warn him of this brewing fact. It was such a surprise, in fact, that many people whose writing I read in advance of preaching this text doubted it.

Scriptural scholars and commentators, they doubted that these who came to Jesus were actually Pharisees. Or they doubted that these actual Pharisees actually meant to warn Jesus of Herod, to get Jesus out of *Herod's* territory. No, they supposed these Pharisees wanted to get Jesus out of *these Pharisee's* territory, wanted to safeguard their own authority. Herod be damned: they were worried about themselves.

Cynical ole' Pharisees: "What are they up to?" seemed to be a guiding question, behind which is a fixed suspicion that no Pharisee could possibly be up to any good. But to suspect this is to forget that Pharisees were actual people, and there were a lot of them. And, yes, they were all likely committed to the Law—the interpretation of it for the keeping of it. But they were all also different people from one another, and therefore all had different ways of being people, of being Pharisees.

God knows I don't want to be lumped in with all clergy everywhere.

Incidentally, I think one of the most persistent errors faithful people make as regards the Bible is to set aside any real thought that the characters in the Bible were real people. Mainline church-types like us do it; more fundamentalist church-types do it; people across the spectrum do it. We all seem to forget that the people written of in the Bible were *people*—though I suppose we do so for it for different reasons.

I suppose that fundamentalists do it for fear of what people are actually like—mixed up, confused, corrupt even. Not wanting to paint with the same grimy brush the heroes of the Bible, they read the people of the Bible as un-grimy, as purged of such unclean complications.

What's more, every single one of them, it seems, is to be seen as an example for us—either of how we should be or of how we should not be.

But, see, this is not only to shrug off the obdurate fact that we are each who we are, which is to say we're simply incapable of becoming someone else, no matter how exemplary that "someone else" is. (Any of us who've ever been asked to "become more like your sister" or "more like your brother" knows how damning an undertaking that actually is.)

What's more, to consider the people filling the pages and stories of the Bible as "examples to us" is also to disregard their own intrinsic being. Try it: not to consider Abraham as an example, but a man, a person simply living his life—strange as that life might have been, full of odd conversations with God, and ceremonies of covenant, and promises of a future that could hardly be believed and yet would come to pass. Yes to all that, but yes also that he was a

person, just as you are, just as I am. Consider Mary not as an example of how you *should* be, if only you could get your act together, but as a woman, a girl, simply alive during a certain propitious time. When I make this mental shift, I find all these folks much more interesting, not to mention encouraging. Not that I be like them but that they are like me: this *inspires* me.

But then I might be heard as believing that they're all actually real. And this, I suppose, is why people in the mainline church have flattened the people of the Bible into phantasms: we wouldn't want to be perceived as so foolish to believe that Adam, for example, was actually real. Or Abraham. Or Moses. These figures are arch-types, or are mythic amalgamations. King David may or may not have been a musician, may or may not have composed some of the psalms. He may or may not have been mighty in battle, conquering this nation and that nation until eventually he established a land for the people Israel and at last brought the Ark of Covenant home. He may or may not have seen the beautiful Bathsheba on her roof across the city from his palace, and he may or may not have taken her as his own.

But it seems to me you can hold some skepticism as to the historical reality of all the details of every story told of every person throughout these 1500 years that the Bible stories span, while also considering how people actually operate, what motivates them and what undermines them, how they stand on their own and how they function in groups or affiliations.

And by "they," I of course mean "we."

No, David as we are presented him in the Bible, might not be as David actually was. (For how could he be? The David we meet in 1st and 2nd Chronicles is different from the David we meet in 1st and 2nd Kings.) But let's consider him *as if* he were—a real person living amidst real history and real humanity, and making decisions based on real human emotion and reason and urge.

Let's consider these "some Pharisees" in the same way. Unnamed though they were, they shouldn't be thought indistinct from one another, and indistinct from the all the Pharisees that ever were.

This whole rant is by way of saying, I don't doubt there were some Pharisees good and confident in their calling. I don't doubt that some Pharisees weren't all that interested in seeing Jesus cut down. No, I imagine that some might even have been sympathetic to Jesus, admiring of his energy and spirit, appreciative of his upsetting so many norms that had indeed

begun to falsify the nation's witness to the Living God. After all, even those most invested in such norms can glimpse from time to time the shadow-side of such norms.

So, some Pharisees came, I can allow, and they warned Jesus that he should leave Herod's territory because Herod was looking to kill him. And Jesus' response was, in essence, "Not so fast." He put it more provocatively, though. "Tell that fox..."

Did he do so knowing that he'd, but a breath later, liken himself to a hen gathering her brood beneath her wings? Little matter. Whether it was a conscious rhetorical choice or poetic rhetorical flow, he was certainly on to something.

There's a hen in the fox-house.

But here's the truth of the matter: there was no hen that sacrificed herself in a fire in Yellowstone National Park. Likewise there was no hen whose chicks survived a farmyard because of the intensity of her self-giving brooding, as another Internet meme testified. As for the editors at *National Geographic*, here's what they had to say about this, which they released in a statement, "We've been getting a lot of e-mails about this. It's an inspirational story — which is why we regret that we have to debunk it. The incident was never reported in *National Geographic*. Nor did it happen at Yellowstone, according to the park's ornithologist, who adds that it doesn't ring true of bird behavior anywhere." And yet it showed up, not only on the Internet, but also in a recent biblical commentary, *Luke for Everyone*, written by no less a scholar than N.T. Wright, one of the giants in the field.

So maybe I *am* the only to have a problem with this.

As it happens this story originated as an inspirational parable from 1945. Snopes notes, "The Little Red Hen was one of the thirteen original pamphlets published as part of the Illustrated Gospel Series... The tale of a self-sacrificing mother fowl was not a true account but rather a yarn meant to teach a Bible lesson about the love Jesus felt for his children, a love so great that he gave his life so that they could be saved."

And, though this is true — this which I've staked my life on, that Jesus' love for the world, as God's love for the world, was and is so great that they suffered the cross so we, the world, might be saved — I don't want to hear an untrue story in order to establish the veracity of the original claim. It just makes me doubt — cynically doubt, bitterly doubt — the whole thing.

Don't lie to me in order for me to come to some truth. Don't tell me a sentimental

fabrication in order that I might come to a bedrock of truth. Instead, let me just sit with the metaphor as Jesus handed it to us, troubling as it might be, troubling as it is, *challenging* as it is.

There's a chapter in my book entitled, "Wrong Bird." It's one of the short chapters, not a sermon but what I've called (with Hannah, my editor's, help) an "Aside." Even among the "Asides," this one's pretty short. Its beginning will be familiar to you: "There's a hen in the fox house. That's what Jesus seemed to imply... A hen."

I write more about that here, much of which I've already told you this morning. But I also write this: "I wonder how that sounded to the disciples who heard him say it. I figure they might have expected Jesus to choose a mightier bird, perhaps an eagle. That's a favorite in the Old Testament for giving an image to God. The books of Moses often hear God as likening himself to an eagle. The prophets often understand God as such: a bird of power, a bird of prey—[you know, the sort of bird that could take care of a fox. But] What good could a hen do? We might wonder the same. A hen in the fox house: What good would that do? That's only any good if there are lots more hens than foxes, and even then it's a troubling notion. One thing's for certain, I'd rather not be the hen trying to gather in that brood. But then, sometimes history makes demands of us, as does any given day."

I realize I just went on at some length about how the characters we meet in the Bible aren't meant to be examples to us. I stand by that, with one exception. There is one character we meet in the Bible whom we're meant to emulate.

Guess who that would be?

If we imagine ourselves as one of the chicks Jesus meant to gather under her wings—*tenderly* gather, *lovingly* gather—we wouldn't be wrong in doing. But we might also imagine ourselves as such a hen, willing to gather in the vulnerable at whatever cost to ourselves.

If we are those beloved chicks, perhaps we might *aim* to be that determined hen.

Sit with that for a while and you'll soon see that, yes, the fox could get one of us. But it couldn't get all of us—and I don't know what to say about this except that here is an implication I can't sentimentalize away. I can only promise that my aim is Christ, which might be yours too, and the more there are of us the better for all.

Thanks be to God.

