

Under Her Wings

2nd Sunday of Lent, Year C - Luke 13:22-35

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, February 24, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

One of the places I visited when I got the chance to spend a week or so in Jerusalem a few years ago, was the Dominus Flevit Chapel near the top of the Mount of Olives overlooking the city of Jerusalem. The Chapel, built a thousand years ago by and for European pilgrims to the Holy Land, is named in Latin, “the Lord wept,” referring to the story that Luke tells in this morning’s Gospel lesson. Instead of a beautiful stained glass window or an ornately carved reredos, the eastern wall behind the altar is open. As visitors ancient and modern worship there, they look past the altar onto a panoramic view of the gold-domed Temple Mount and the city of Jerusalem.

It is a truly, and uniquely beautiful vista. What I have always found most remarkable about this place, however, what has always utterly fascinated me about this place, is the altar itself. The front of the altar in Dominus Flevit Chapel is adorned with an ornate mosaic, the central figure of which... is a chicken, of all things. A white hen, to be precise, a white hen with a golden halo around her head, with her wings spread wide to shelter a clutch of yellow chicks that crowd around her feet. The chicks look content and happy, unconcerned or *unaware* of any potential danger. But the hen has a vigilant, protective look, ready to spit fire if anyone comes near her brood.

Given the number of images available, it is curious that Jesus chooses a hen in this morning’s Gospel lesson, the story that so captured some medieval chapel builder. A hen? Where is the biblical precedent for *that*? If he was looking for a symbol of powerful protection, what about the mighty *eagle* of Exodus? What about Hosea’s stealthy *leopard*? What about the proud *lion* of Judah, mowing down its enemies with a deafening roar? Yet, Jesus chose to talk about himself as that lowly mother hen. You know, I suspect that instead of any of these mighty beasts, Jesus chose the image of that mother hen precisely because she *is* lowly. Awkward, nearly defenseless herself, that mother hen stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm with *no* fangs, *no* claws, *no* rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her young ones with her *self*. When danger is upon them, when the enemy comes to snatch them up, the mother hen gathers her beloved to her, and dies *herself*, if need be, in order to save *them*.

Back in ninth chapter of Luke’s Gospel, shortly after the wonderful transfiguration story that was our portion of the Gospel a couple of weeks ago, I mentioned to you that Jesus “set his face toward Jerusalem, the Holy City”. The rest of Luke’s Gospel, and the rest of our Lenten journey, takes us along on Jesus’s fateful journey to Jerusalem, and the world-changing events that would take place there, up the Temple steps, to the Temple courts, for last visits with his friends, and a last supper with his disciples. We will hear hosannas in the streets, whispered prayers in the Garden, and the clang of hammer to nail at the place of the Skull.

But here in this morning’s portion of the journey, Jesus has paused just outside the gates of the great city, perhaps on the hill where stands that ancient chapel, perhaps looking over that same panoramic view, Jesus has paused, and *Dominus flevit*, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

For the people of first century Palestine, Jerusalem was more than just a geographical location, more than just a walled fortress, more than just a bustling city. Jerusalem was the one place where the Temple stood as a monument to the worship of the Almighty Lord. Jerusalem was the one place where the faithful made their pilgrimages and offered their sacrifices to renew their bonds to one another and to

God. Jerusalem was the one place where the rich heritage of God's people was celebrated and nourished and kept alive. Jerusalem was the *heart* of the People of God, the symbol, the *essence* of their unique, privileged relationship with God. If any place on earth *should* have been open and receptive to God's messengers, it *should* have been Jerusalem.

And here at the gates of this mighty city-symbol was Jesus, the Messiah, the fulfillment of all the hopes and the expectations and the *dreams* of generation after generation of God's people. Here he was, opening blind eyes. unstopping deaf ears. making the lame to walk. Here he was, preaching peace and forgiveness and love. Here he was, holding out his hands to them and proclaiming that the day of salvation... at long last... had come!

But with every beat of his all-too-human heart, Jesus *knew* what the outcome of his journey to Jerusalem would be. And yet, with tears still burning his eyes, he turned his face toward the beloved city that had always killed its prophets. In the language of those pilgrim a thousand years after his time, and a thousand years before ours, that beautiful mosaic on the chapel altar spells out our Lord's cry, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you... were not willing!"

We in Christ's Church have been called to become the light on the hill that Jerusalem was *meant* to be. Like Jerusalem, we *should* be the *one* place, the *one* people most open to God's continuing words and work. We *should* be the focus of God's action in the world. We *should* be the place where the wounded find healing. We *should* be the place where the scatted find refuge. We *should* be the place where the broken find peace. Like Jerusalem, we *should* carry in our hearts, and proclaim with our lives, the goodness and the power and the glory of being God's beloved people. But how often have we been more like the city over which Jesus lamented?

Instead of a place of action, focused on bringing people through the narrow door of salvation, how often has the Church been more like scurrying, scattered chicks, unaware or unheedful of the very real dangers at hand? How often have we been more a pathetic whimper of pluralistic pacification or supposed social relevance, rather than the clarion voice of proclamation for the absolute Good News of Jesus Christ? How often have *we* been the city that stones those who are sent to it? Could it be that Jesus' lament is more urgent for *us* today than it was for that city two thousand years ago? Could it be that it is *we* who have squandered God's *greatest* gift? Could it be that if we, the Church of Jesus Christ, were the servants and the messengers that Christ has called us to be, that there would be less cause for our own weeping over our cities, our nation, and our world? "How often have I desired to gather your children together," Jesus says again today, "and *you*... were not willing!"

You see, that determined, protective, vigilant mother hen *still* spreads her wings over *all* who will gather there. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield those that are her own with her very *self*. Our Savior spread his arms wide to gather us *all* under the wings of God's mercy and love. And from the depths of his suffering on the cross, we hear once again, "How often have I desired to gather *you*!"

Are *you* willing to give up your pretended position of privilege and power, to obtain the unfathomable *gift* that you have been offered? Are *you* willing to set aside your right to hold a grudge to receive God's perfect pardon? Are *you* willing to give up your tale-telling and your tongue-wagging and your back-biting bickering to become blessed messengers of the *Good News*? Are you willing to leave behind your cozy, comfortable couch of ease, to go *wherever* God sends you, to say *whatever* God tells you? Are *you* willing to be gathered up under those precious, purifying wings of mercy and love?

Day by day, moment by moment, breath by breath, are *you* willing? Right here, right now, are you *willing*? As you leave here this morning, as you go to your place of homing, your place of work, your place of play, are you willing? Step by step, as we continue our journey together to Jerusalem, are you willing?