

Luke 13:31-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-18

17.03.19

She's got us covered

To begin with, some song lyrics:

Oh, a storm is threat'ning

My very life today

If I don't get some shelter

Oh yeah, I'm gonna fade away

I had thought of suggesting to Richard that we include in our service today a rendering of the Rolling Stones' classic 'Gimme Shelter' from which those lyrics come, but on balance I decided that it would not be very Presbyterian. Certainly, however, the sentiments of that opening verse of the song would fit our passage from Luke's Gospel nicely. For Jesus, a storm is threatening. He is headed for Jerusalem, the capital city and one that has a long history of persecuting prophets and rejecting God's envoys. He is going there to give Jerusalem a chance to hear and to respond to his message, to turn from its misguided ways and to submit to God's rule. But the Pharisees, this religious grouping who are not generally well-disposed to Jesus, come and warn him. Herod, the Jewish ruler imposed upon the Jews by the Roman Empire, is out to get him. Herod apparently sees Jesus as a threat to his own power and we all know how power deals with those who threaten it. Hence the Pharisees' warning: 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.' So a storm is threatening Jesus' very life – and he needs shelter.

Jesus, however, is not intimidated by Herod. He sends back a defiant message, 'Go and tell that fox Herod for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work".' In other words I must do what must be done; there is a clear plan which I must follow and nothing will deflect me. Herod is a fox, sly and lethal - but I will not be chicken. Or at least I will not be chicken in the sense of afraid. But how I wish I could gather Jerusalem under my arms like a hen gathering her chicks and shield them from what is to come if they reject me and follow the path of self-destruction that they are set upon. In other words I will not seek shelter, but how I wish I could give it. I will not play chicken to Herod's fox, but how I wish I could be the mother hen who protects her fragile brood under her wings.

It is such a beautiful image - Christ the mother hen – and it's one with deep roots in the Old Testament. Back in the Book of Ruth we find the story of Ruth, a vulnerable and displaced refugee from the land of Moab who seeks refuge in Israel. And Ruth is blessed with the words, 'may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge.' Here Ruth is commended to Israel's God whose wings offer protection. And we find the image repeated in the psalms: Psalm 91, 'he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find shelter.' Here is a picture of divine, protective love. And of course it is significant that Jesus' use of this image is female: he pictures himself as the mother hen. And Jesus was not concerned with political correctness but the fact is that he took a gentle and deliberately feminine image to contrast himself with the vicious, male fox that is Herod. And there is surely an invitation here to be a little more diverse and bold in our language about God and to join Jesus in giving female imagery its right place – and what better day to say this than today with the relaunch of the Women's Fellowship!

I want, however, to focus in on this image of the mother hen covering her chicks with her wings because I think it is one that is very revealing, and it takes us deeper into our life with God. Here Christ pictures himself as covering his people, protecting them from their foes – but there are other threats that Jesus covers and protects us from apart from political predators like Herod or like Rome. And, perhaps surprisingly, we could begin with a reminder that we need protection from God. For yes, we talk a lot about being protected *by* God, but is there not a sense in which we need protection *from* God? So a couple of weeks ago we read in our service about how Moses went up on the mountain and there he communed with God and when he came down again he had to put a veil over his face, as it shone with such dazzling brightness. We can't know what Moses saw of God on that mountain for just prior to this he had been told that no-one can see the face of God and live. But whatever Moses saw on the mountain it left his face glowing with such intensity that it had to be covered. And our reading from 2 Corinthians this morning picks up that passage and speaks of us as Christians beholding the glory of God – but not directly. It refers to '... all of us with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of God as though reflected in a mirror...' In other words we can only see God as deflected and reflected by that mirror who is Christ. He is our Mediator who reflects God – the mother hen who protects us from God's full, all-consuming and searing

glory that would otherwise consume us. So that hymn we just sang begins with the words,

Beneath the shadow of thy wings,
My Father and my God, I rest...

But the hymn goes on to say of Christ, ‘forth from his face thy glories shine...’ In other words we may behold the glory of God but only as reflected in the face of Christ.

Indeed, that is why we can gather here in the presence of God as we do this morning. That’s why we can believe that God is present here among us now, in this gathering – every bit as present to us here as God was to Moses on the mountain - without our being destroyed. It’s because, if you open the eye of your imagination, you might just see a large mother hen on the roof of this church, her wings covering us, mediating God’s presence to us – but sheltering us from what would otherwise destroy us.

This leads us, however, to another sense in which Christ the mother hen covers us with her wings. And that is in relation to sin, for when we turn to the Old Testament and how God deals with sin what do we find? Well, we find that God deals with it by covering it. You will have heard of the great Jewish feast and festival of Yom Kippur, and Yom Kippur is traditionally the day of atonement, the day every year when God deals with Israel’s sin. And in the Old Testament there is a lot of blood and a lot of sacrifice on that day. But the root of the word ‘Kippur’ means ‘to cover’ and so Yom Kippur is literally The Day of Covering. So we read in Psalm 32, ‘Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.’ And when Christ laments over Jerusalem and longs to cover them as a hen covers her brood, he is longing too to cover their sins.

In the Bible the classic ‘sin story’, of course, comes near the beginning where we read of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, and we read how after their transgression they realised that they were naked and sewed fig leaves together and made loin cloths to cover their shame. And perhaps there is an inkling there of our tendency to try to cover up wrong, to hide it. We might think of several high profile trials and investigations going on in the USA at present where wrong-doing is being exposed and cover-ups dismantled. And there can be no cover-up with sin – it must be exposed, confessed, brought out into the light, and that can be painful. But then, praise God, it can be covered – and so lose its destructive power. And so to those who feel the guilt and the

pain of their wrong, to those who carry the burden of shame, there is no better news than to say, ‘your sins are covered. By the graceful, forgiving wings of the mother hen they are covered over. Find shelter there.’

So to one last reflection on the mother hen. It is an image of Christ, but might it not also be an image of Christ’s body the church? Could not ‘mother church’ be mother hen, spreading her wings over the vulnerable and threatened? I am reminded of the inspiring story of what happened in the village of Chambon-Sur-Lignon in the Auvergne region of South-central France in the Second World War. Led by a Protestant pastor, André Trocmé and his wife and assistant, this village and surrounding villages sheltered over 5000 people – including up to three and a half thousand Jews - from the Vichy government and the Nazis. And so the church and surrounding community became Christ, the mother hen, sheltering her chicks. Eventually, in February 1943, the leaders of the village including Pastor Trocmé were arrested. When the two policemen came to take them away it happened to be dinner time and so Madame Trocmé invited them to dine with them – despite the presence in the house of refugee Jews hiding upstairs. ‘It was dinner time – the food was ready’, said Madame Trocmé afterwards. Interestingly, the attitude of the villagers was summed up as, ‘we were doing what had to be done’ – words which echo Jesus, “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work”.’ Or, in short, ‘I am doing what needs to be done’. And what needed to be done here was not just to give shelter to the Jews and others who were threatened, but to extend hospitality even to the agents of the fox – to expand the bounds of the nest to the enemy. We are always challenged to go further!

But there is, of course, a story that is far closer to home which we could tell – the story of the Bethel church in the Hague who recently gave shelter to the Armenian family threatened with deportation, and which our church here supported. Here again was a brood gathered beneath the wings of the hen. And we need to tell these stories and hold onto them. In an age of unbelief and hostility to our faith here is where we follow our Lord, as we bear witness to the grace of the mother hen in a world too often threatened by foxes – and where far too many chicks are threatened. May God help the body of Christ to become the mother hen. Amen.

Holy and Gracious God,
we lift up our hearts and our voices to praise you,
eternal and sovereign Lord,
all powerful, eternal, almighty,
infinite and majesty and dominion.
You are our rock, or fortress, our strength.
And yet we praise you too vulnerable God,
come amongst us in the fragile flesh of Jesus of Nazareth,
renouncing glory and power,
coming to us as a servant,
coming to us like a mother hen,
spreading your wings over us to protect us.
Mothering God forgive us that we resist your love;
forgive us that we are unwilling
to be gathered under you wings;
forgive us that we turn from you
and become a scattered people
in conflict with one another.
O Lord, have mercy upon us we pray
and forgive us for our sins.
Gather us together once more under your wings
of mercy and forgiveness,
and give us grace to live our lives courageously and well.
We pray these things on Jesus' name and
In his word we pray together, saying...