

As a Hen Gathers Her Brood

a sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on March 13, 2022

based on Luke 13:31-35

In the scripture text set for today some Pharisees come to warn Jesus he better get out of town, because Herod, Jewish king / Roman puppet wants to kill him. This is surprising because other gospels give us a picture of the Pharisees as the bad guys. Here they seem to be concerned for Jesus and warn him about Herod's intentions.

Old Herod is not somebody to mess with. You may remember that John the Baptist got into a bit of hot water with him and wound up with his head on a serving platter. And now Herod was hearing about Jesus, who, he said reminded him of John.

So, if you were told that the most powerful person in your part of the world wanted you dead, how would you react? I bet you're thinking now of Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Vladimir Putin.

Zelenskyy hasn't flinched and neither did Jesus. "Go and tell that fox that I've got bigger concerns than his latest temper tantrum." says Jesus. I've got work to do. Look, I'm casting out demons, I'm healing people, and then I'm going on to Jerusalem, the city that kills prophets."

He speaks of Herod as a fox. Now a fox is solitary, sly, cunning and destructive. And Jesus, by contrast, pictures himself as something quite different: a chicken. While Herod is bent on destruction, Jesus is filled with compassion and his purpose is loving protection. He knows that Jerusalem has killed the prophets, and he knows what awaits him there, and yet he has this deep, tender, love for the city and for its people. It might as well be Kyiv, capitol of Ukraine.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

Well, anyone who is a parent of a young one knows what I am talking about.

I am so struck by those words of Jesus: "and you were not willing." How frustrating it is when we want to help someone, your kids or your elderly mom; whomever, but the walls are up and you can't get through.

Now, the image of Jesus as chicken is not particularly satisfying, on the face of it. But we need to understand the image he uses: a mother hen, gathering her brood, out of love, out of care; a mother hen, whose only concern is for the safety of her chicks.

There's the story about the day the hen house burns down. The farm family sorts through the wreckage, and they come upon one hen lying dead near what had been the door of the hen house. Her top feathers are singed brown by the fire's heat, her neck limp. Someone bends down to pick up the dead hen and as she does, she feels movement. The hen's four chicks come scurrying out from beneath her burnt body.

Look at that ! The chicks survive because they have been insulated by the shelter of the hen's wings. They have been saved even as she died to protect them.

That's the image of Jesus' sacrificial love: "Oh, how I would have gathered you under my wings, but you would have none of it."

Now, while that is a moving and comforting image, when it comes to dealing with foxes we would actually prefer something a little more muscular, wouldn't we. When the foxes of our world start prowling outside the door, it would be nice to have a more effective defense than a mother hen. Right?

Back in 1986 the movie *Pale Rider*, starring Clint Eastwood, was released. Every clergy person in Portland was invited to a special preview of the movie; just us clergy. Now, I had no idea what some "pale rider" might have to do with church, but, it was free and I went.

Clint plays a frontier preacher with a past, only you don't know what kind of past. He walks around in his clerical collar, deeply pained. Once when he takes his shirt off, you can see scars from three bullet wounds in his back.

One day he rides into a mining town that has been overrun by "foxes." The corrupt sheriff is in cahoots with a bunch of armed thugs who shoot anyone in their way. For a while, Clint just takes it in, figuring out who all the players are.

Then he goes to the bank and produces a key to a safety deposit box – turns out that it's a key to his past. He pulls out a drawer and there are (no surprise) two six-shooters and a belt full of bullets. He straps it on his waist, takes off his clerical collar and puts it back in the drawer. That's when some of the clergy in the theater started hooting with approval. "Go get 'em, Clint! Nail their tails to the wall!" Which, of course, Clint does.

Well, Clint Eastwood is . . . *Clint Eastwood*, and Jesus is Jesus. And there is a world of difference. Jesus, too, bore scars on his body. He too means to protect the chicks from the foxes, but, take note of this one thing: *he refuses to become a fox in order to do it.*

He refuses to fight fire with fire. He is the one who says, "He who lives by the sword, dies by the sword." When Herod and his bullies came after Jesus and his brood, he does not produce any six-shooters to stop them. He just puts himself between them and the chicks, all fluffed up and hunkered down.

In the novel, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, the protagonist, Atticus Finch, insists on taking his son Jem to see an elderly woman he calls, "Miss Dubose" who is dying of cancer. Jem is incredulous. She has been his father's most bitter critic. She is the most outspoken opponent of his championing the rights of black people in their Southern town. Atticus explains that her battle with cancer has gone on for years. At one point she had become addicted to morphine, but near her own end she was determined to free herself from that dependency.

After her death Atticus explains to Jem why he took him there to see her. He says, "I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do. Mrs. Dubose won, all 98 pounds of her. According to her views, she died beholden to nothing and nobody. She was the bravest person I ever knew."

Jesus would have adored that story. In the end, in his own way he wins as a mother hen. It sure didn't look that at first with feathers all over the place and chicks running for cover. But in time it became clear what he had done. He had refused to run from the foxes and he had refused to become one of them. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

He died a mother hen and he came back to them with teeth marks on his body to make sure they got the point; that the power of the foxes of this world could not kill his love for them, nor could it steal them away from him.

That last part is key – he doesn't lose them to the love of violence that identifies those on the other side. According to tradition, the disciples mostly die martyrs deaths themselves. They don't take up the sword.

"A fox against a hen doesn't seem like a fair fight," says Barbara Brown Taylor, "but God bet the farm on the hen."

Now we might want to just leave it at that, a very comforting image of God, gathering us under her wings, loving us whatever the price. It is a beautiful picture that we can take comfort from. But we cannot simply leave it at that.

That is because the call to follow Christ is not only a call to be comforted and cared for. We are called to be as Christ. The Church is called to be Christ's body here on this earth, and we are called to grow from chicks into chickens. Like Jesus, we are to give of ourselves for those who are vulnerable, those who are hurting, those who are lost.

We are to stand up to the powerful foxes of this world, not run from them, and not becoming foxes ourselves. We are to fight hatred with compassionate love. We are called to put our bodies between their greed and narcissism, and the powerless.

Let me interject something here. It is my belief that Christianity, the religion that sprang up out of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, got hijacked by Jesus's cross.

The cross of Christ which has become our galvanizing symbol has so transfixed Christians for the last 1700 years that we have forgotten that the call of Jesus is for *all* of us to lay down our lives, too. Of course, no one can be blamed for wanting to take a pass on that. But it's definitely key to the enterprise as Jesus handed it down.

Here's the deal -- thousands of Palestinians were crucified by the Romans in Jesus's time. It happened daily. It happened daily because the Romans were anxious to teach daily lessons to the people's they subjugated that they would put up with no dissent.

Crucifixion is a form of state sponsored terrorism. The Romans didn't have enough soldiers to be everywhere in their huge empire, so they relied on fear to deter citizens of the nations they subjugated. The cross is then, actually a sign of their weakness, not their strength.

Furthermore, Jesus knew that some of his disciples would eventually die this way, too, which tradition says they did. This is precisely what the world does to people who are like Jesus and want to follow him by standing up for the weak.

"If I can endure this so can you," he is saying. "Greater love hath no one than that he or she lay down their life for another."

You know, the Herods of this world can't understand this. After the initial rush toward Kyiv two weeks ago, the Russian media announced that Volodymyr Zelenskyy had fled the capitol. After all, he was just a comedian with low approval ratings as president. They expected nothing else.

I mean, Putin knew that if he was in Zelensky's place he'd cut and run, but then, like all despots, he is a coward at heart. He didn't know that Zelensky has Jesus's blend of courage and empathy for his people. Like Jesus, he knows the odds are against him and he is likely to die, but he will die at his post, protecting his people and rallying the world to a vision different from the autocrats like Putin who have lately been making gains against democracy and the welfare of little people around the globe.

You know, back in 2017 so many pundits and pulpiteers like me, were saying, "Donald Trump is not the real problem. He is just a symptom of something larger." Donald Trump rode a wave to the White House and we did our best to identify that wave.

We identified it as sociological. We saw that the justly disaffected working-class voters supported him, and the folks who didn't like being laughed at by certain liberal elites did the same. But then we couldn't help but note that there was more going on.

President Trump chose to befriend Kim Jong-un of North Korea and that was peculiar but maybe understandable. And then he championed Vladimir Putin and that just seemed weird and unnecessary. Putin is anything but a friend of our way of life.

Once President Trump lost in 2020 we expected him to say the election was rigged. Well, he'd said that for a year – that if he lost it would only be because the election would have been stolen. But then he doubled down, going further, going infinitely lower, organizing a coup carried out on our capitol on January 6 – something few saw coming.

But now with Putin's moves on Ukraine the bigger picture is coming into focus. Like so many others, I figured Putin's buildup of troops on the Ukraine border was just a show of strength for diplomatic purposes. He'd have to be crazy to do anything more. He'd gotten our attention – Washington was willing to bargain – allow Putin's sphere of influence to grow a little; become legitimate.

But he had to have more. It is clear that he will not be happy until the Western ideal of rule by vote of majorities is history.

We're just now beginning to comprehend that the American experiment is still just an experiment – it's only 200 years old and rule by autocrats is deep-seated. It's been around for millennia. We're fighting a new American revolution except that for America's version of democracy to be fully legitimized the battlefield of that war is now global. The battle is for the soul of the earth. It's a battle against all the Herods of all time, represented today by Putin and Kim Jong-un and Duterte, and Orban, and Erdogan, and within or own country, by Trump and all the January 6th apologists who don't really like democracy.

However, the fact that so many people on our political extremes are finally seeing through Putin and championing Ukraine gives me hope. Zelenskyy is right. This fight is not about Ukraine; it's about what kind of governance we want on this earth – what kind of world we want for our grandchildren.

So, with this war going on, and the side of right asking us daily for weapons, what can followers of Jesus and his apparent pacifism do? Do we just roll over?

Here is something so enigmatic from the lips of Jesus: "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves."

Let me end with a story that gets at that. It's the story of a man named you most likely have never heard of: Herman Fritz Graebe.

Graebe was a Polish engineer and a contractor who, early in World War II, saw the genocide Hitler was perpetrating and, like Oscar Schindler, he hired as many Jews as he could to protect them and their families from the murderous wiles of Adolf Eichmann.

That was easy, comparatively, but Graebe did more than Oscar Schindler.

When he saw the German occupiers of Poland turn the Jewish Ghetto in the city of Warsaw into a holding pen for Jews, Graebe went around the city and got agreements from people he trusted to hide Jews who he planned to liberate from the Ghetto.

Here is how he did it. First he bought a long black leather trench-coat (known to be worn by Gestapo operatives). Then he purchased a machine gun to look even more menacing.

Next he walked into the Warsaw ghetto one sunny day and rounded up 125 Jews who he instructed to walk out of the Ghetto with him, their hands up behind their necks as if they were under his arrest. He cut a fearsome figure. No one, neither Nazi or Jew, dared ask him any questions.

He then delivered the Jews to the people waiting to hide them. Marching with Graebe they expected to be executed and instead were given their freedom and their lives.

Now, here's my favorite story about Fritz Graebe. When word of his impending arrest was leaked to him, Graebe, totally fearless, marched into Gestapo headquarters in Warsaw, right into the office of the man in charge. He told the S.S. official who he was, and seeing a piece of paper on the man's desk with a list of names of his own employees who were obvious informers on him he grabbed it, memorized it, walked out and fired all those people.

Graebe lived out the war and eventually died in San Francisco, California in 1986. At his Christian funeral a rabbi delivered these words as part of the eulogy.

On the first night of Passover, the children around the seder table ask the age-old question, "Why is this night different from all others?" The question is central to the seder and to the lives of free men and women everywhere.

So sacred is the question that even a person who is alone at a Passover table must speak it aloud, for the Talmud teaches that the voices of free men and free women must never be silenced. Those who suppress the question are those who learn to follow orders.

Those who do not question are those who adjust--to anything, to any system, to any order, to any master.

The rabbi continued: On the day before Passover this year, 1986, a Christian man who would not be mute was laid to rest. He was born Hermann Fritz Graebe, but many knew him as the Moses of Rovno for his role in helping hundreds of Jews to escape captivity in Nazi Germany.

Graebe was brought up with his mother's repeated question, "And Fritz, what would you do [in the face of injustice]?" That existential question carried within it the seeds of his healthy conscience, freeing him from paralyzing obedience to authorities.

His mother's question was Hermann Graebe's answer to the question put to him repeatedly in later years: "Why?" Why did he, a German Christian, endanger his life and those of his wife, Elizabeth, and son, Fred?

Why did he, an engineer, risk his position, security, safety, to hide the hunted from predators, to shelter, feed, and smuggle Jews into freedom; why did he exhaust his health and wealth to shield a vilified people; why did he risk, and then suffer, vilification himself by coming forward as the only German citizen to testify [against the Nazi leadership] at Nuremberg?

Why? Because Graebe anticipated the question that every child is bound to ask: "And what, Father, did you do in those terrible days?" ...

Fritz Graebe knew fear. He also knew that ... "there are times when a man [or a woman] ought to be more afraid of living than of dying." (F.J.E. Woodbridge)

Amen

*Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon, FOXES AND HENS, provided the inspiration and direction for this sermon.