

Under God's Wings

Menno Mennonite Church

March 16, 2025

Purpose: To explore the ways that our fears stand in the way of the Kingdom priorities.

Message: Jesus calls us beyond that which we would condemn and fear to new life.

Scripture: Luke 13:1-9; 31-35 (may be split into individual readings)

Synopsis: We come to the work of faith with a lot of responsibility. We want to be responsible practitioners of faith. We have religious expectations of the spiritual life that we would have. But often, we find ourselves unable to meet the expectations that we ourselves have for ourselves and our participation in the world. This, more than any particular sense of sin or mis-deed can serve to keep us from fully living our lives of faith as we experience the shame of not living up to the expectations set out for us. But Jesus, even in seeing the walls of Jerusalem and lamenting the failures of that city laments not their incapacity to behave, but their unwillingness to be shelter where they truly are provided for—under the wings of the God who would shelter all, and teach that which makes for peace. We are called to release the culture of shame and should, and to be welcomed underneath the sheltering presence of a protecting God.

NOTE: The theme of “Jesus collides with our condemnation” will not be what I will be leaning into with this sermon. Please plan accordingly.

<https://share.evernote.com/note/0af44b0d-88a9-48d3-9f24-2bee252341f7>

Luke 13:1-9; 31-35

13 Some who were present on that occasion told Jesus about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices.

² He replied, “Do you think the suffering of these Galileans proves that they were more sinful than all the other Galileans?”

³ No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did. ⁴

What about those eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think that they were more guilty of wrongdoing than everyone else who lives in Jerusalem?

⁵ No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did.”

⁶ Jesus told this parable:
“A man owned a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it and found none.

⁷ He said to his gardener,
‘Look, I’ve come looking for fruit on this fig tree for the past three years, and I’ve never found any. Cut it down!

Why should it continue depleting the soil’s nutrients?’

⁸ The gardener responded, ‘Lord, give it one more year, and I will dig around it and give it fertilizer.

⁹ Maybe it will produce fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down.’ ”

³¹ At that time, some Pharisees approached Jesus and said,
“Go! Get away from here, because Herod wants to kill you.”

³² Jesus said to them, “Go, tell that fox,
‘Look, I’m throwing out demons
and healing people today and tomorrow,
and on the third day I will complete my work.

³³ However, it’s necessary for me to travel today, tomorrow, and the next day
because it’s impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’

³⁴ “Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
you who kill the prophets
and stone those who were sent to you!

How often I have wanted to gather your people
just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.

But you didn’t want that.

³⁵ Look, your house is abandoned.

I tell you, you won’t see me until the time comes when you say,
Blessings on the one who comes in the Lord’s name.”

The Camp I grew up at had a “we MUST play this every week” game called survival. You were one of three types; herbivore, omnivore, and carnivore. According to your animal type and size, you had different requirements to meet of food and water at stations throughout the camp, along with a set number of life tags to make ends meet. Whoever got all that they needed, and still had at least one life tag at the end of the game, survived. If you were a carnivore or an omnivore (and you always wanted to be a carnivore) you also had to get some life tags from the little creatures around you. If you were a lowly herbivore you tried to hide as best you could lest you be set upon by a hungry cabin mate. It was nature, red in tooth and claw, and you certainly knew who was secure and who was not.

While the game Midwestern forest, I am sure that had there been a chicken role, it would have been one of the least popular of the luck of the draw. Chickens, in our order of beasts, do not rank very highly on the scales of the very wise or particularly powerful, a reality easily born out if you only spend a little time around a flock from time to time. Spare some relatively ineffective flapping of wings and making a racket whenever something comes near, they are not exactly the most impactful defenders of the animal world, nor the most noble of beasts either. Their primary spiritual role seems to be as the worst possible insult of the playground—right up there with mother wearing combat boots if you want to goad someone to action. The common, run of the mill chicken is really not much to speak of, and certainly not to be held up as a model of anything, spare productivity and a relatively insatiable appetite. That and making pretty good soup.

But here we are with Jesus likening God with us to this very beast when wanting to speak of protection and salvation. The closer he comes to the center of power and prestige, the greater peril he is in and more sincere the grief is for it. Just across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem you will find a small church with an unusual piece of art. There are any numbers of way of depicting the Holy God in various form. We have the lion of Judah, the Lamb of God of which the prophets speak, the Godly eagle of the psalms, and now the chicken of Christ, longing to gather in his brood around him. Just look at this image. This is one holy, mean chicken, halo and all. The mosaic is laid in the alter of the church forming its center, the image around which the entire church is organized and its this. The Latin around the edges of the emblem are the words of Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem, the city that would not be gathered in, chicks though they are.

This is quite a remarkable image of the one founding the kingdom of God, an image that we may not be entirely sure what to do with.

To be sure, the geography is significant here. Jerusalem in many ways looms large throughout the Gospels, but rarely more so than within Luke. Jerusalem is mentioned 90 times through out, with all the other accounts Jesus put together only adding up to a mere 49 mentions. So this is important. Luke's Jerusalem is the center of life and living and the pivot around which Jesus' ministry revolves. This story of the warning to stay away from the city lest Herod act against him lies at the middle of what is called the travel narrative. This is a stretch of the middle chapters of Luke from Chapter 9 when he sets his face toward the city of power and when he arrives in arrives weeping over the sight of the city in Chapter 19. Jerusalem is the seat of political and spiritual power standing in as a representation for the entirety of the Israel itself. This place rules not only Rome and the power of oppression that it represents, but also the fox-like Herod who has slyly aligned himself with the power of the day to rule Israel for his own gain and to complete the oppression of Rome. Herod had made a choice of where to find his security; in the power of Rome and the power of suppressing anything that would question him as the King of the Jews.

Jesus chooses to not only reject the generally well-meaning advice (we think it is well meant) of the concerned Pharisees in continuing his trajectory toward Jerusalem, but also to reject the model of Jerusalem itself. Here is a military city of might and protection and model the alternative model of where security resides than that of the foxy of the world. It is under imperial rule, but it is also the source of great power from which he could get things accomplished. In expressing his Godly wish to gather the chicks of Israel underneath a protective wing, he is choosing the operable metaphor of kingdom just as much here as he earlier in the chapter in comparing the kingdom to a mustard seed and the leavening yeast. The protective model of the kingdom is the mothering hen, without talons, claws, speed or flight; only a willingness puff herself as big as possible and then to bravely stand between danger and her beloved chicks. If you are going to harm them, you are going to do so over her dead body. The desired model of Godly love for God's children is that of the mothering hen, willingly and deliberately putting her body, defenseless though it is, in harm's way to shelter them from the teeth and guile of the way things are. How is that for an image to ignite the imagination? As it turns out, this is exactly what happens at the end of the journey to Jerusalem when Jesus enters

the fox's den, living out the metaphor with realism beyond our comprehension, wings out stretched, breast broken. Like a mother of so many species, the life of the mother is given as a protection of and witness to we chicks who would follow behind. In longing to gather the whole the faithful under the wings, Jesus completes one more aspect of the image of the kingdom that he is portraying.

Which is why this is so simultaneously beautiful and troubling, both to us and to Jesus. For Jesus this is the grief of his mission. If you have ever loved someone that you could not protect, try though you might, then you begin to understand the depth of Jesus' lament. All anyone can ever do is to hold your arms open wide. You cannot make anyone walk into their embrace. All the while, though, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world: wings spread, fully exposed. But is you fully and finally mean what it is that you say, than this is ultimately how you stand.

Jesus is casting the vision that this is ultimately the view of the world as it might be. He is completing the vision of the kingdom. But we are left with a choice. We can choose our model of security freely and fully. We can choose the model of the fox that places their hope in power, might, cunning, and control. Of out doing the other in the name of power and prestige. It is an attractive model, one that assures security if we are but willing to be searched and scanned, taxed and drafted, extinguishing every threat that lies before us. We can put our trust in the power of political strategy and simply out what maneuvering the other with bluff and guile and let the ends justify the means. There are times when we do this and we are acquainted with the results.

Or we can find our home under the wings of God, who places the safety of the flock before even his own life. This is the place that does not ask us not to try, nor to run headless to danger, but to stand ready for the worst that the world can offer you without becoming the worst yourself. It is standing for the way of God with us, knowing that in standing there is risk. But taking this risk not as a strategic set back but as the natural consequence of following within the kingdom. It is sheltering not within blasé disengagement or going along to get along, but standing for the and within the kingdom come what may.

I will not say that this is an easy choice. Under God's wing, we are vulnerable. We cannot strike back in our own power. It means that we trust in God's security to be shelter us when we are afraid, when the fox is in the yard. It means that we do not rely on the weapons and protections of this world to be our shelter, but rather that we follow in the model of Christ the

Chicken, facing down the fox not in cowardice, but in the sacrificial love of mother for child. In continuing to Jerusalem, in not turning aside when the wisdom would seem to indicate it, Jesus gives us the model of the kingdom, the model of the mother God who would enfold us and shelter us, come what may. This is a hard thing to lean into when all you know is the way of protection at every turning. But that does not make it less true to who and what Jesus is and will be.

Jesus won't be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first; which he does, as it turns out. But that makes all the difference all the same.

We will gather under the vulnerable winds of God? Are we willing to imagine a church that offers itself to the world, imperfectly as it may, but sacrificially all the same. Can we let go of our fear long enough to hold on to the promise of God's protection, even when it puts our peace, our protection into a place of vulnerability?

We each choose every day. May we be given the grace to let go enough to be held onto by the mothering love of our sheltering God.