

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

March 13, 2022

Second Sunday in Lent

PRELUDE “O God, Our Help in Ages Past”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

Today, God comes to us, to gather us in worship:

to wait in silence for the Word, to sit in the Presence of grace.

Tomorrow, the Word of God comes, calling us to go forth to serve:

to bring hope to those who have none, to love all tossed aside by indifference.

The next day, and the next day, the Holy Spirit will come:

so we might discover the gift of peace, and offer it to our broken world.

(Thom M. Shuman, *LectonaryLiturgies.blogspot.com*, revised)

HYMN No. 8 “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty”

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!

O my soul, praise Him, for He is thy health and salvation!

All ye who hear, Now to God’s temple draw near; Join me in glad adoration!

Praise to the Lord! O let all that is in my adore Him!

All that hath life and breath, come now with praises before Him.

Let the Amen Sound from God’s people again: Gladly for aye we adore Him.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

One thing we ask of you, Sheltering God: that when we are afraid, you would bring us into your heart; that when we lose our way, you would give us gentle guides; that when we cry out to you, you would grace us with your presence.

One thing we ask of you, Mothering Christ: that you gather up our doubts and transform them into confidence; that you surround our fears and transform them into faithfulness, that you pick up our broken lives and transform us into your body.

One thing we ask of you, Spirit of Light: that you hold fast to us, so we can stand firm in the Lord; that you stick by us, so we can wait for the Lord through the long hours of life; that you fill us with your gifts, so we can see the goodness of the One who comes.

One thing we ask of you, God in Community, Holy in One, that you hear us when we pray.

Amen.

(Thom M. Shuman, *Bearers of Grace and Justice*)

SCRIPTURE READING

Psalm 27

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.

One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.

For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.

Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!
“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”
Your face, LORD, do I seek.
Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!
If my father and mother forsake me,
the LORD will take me up.

Teach me your way, O LORD,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.
Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.
Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!

Luke 13:31-35

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day

I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' 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! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

SERMON

In the early days of the COVID lockdown two years ago, there was a lot of talk about people suddenly stuck at home getting pets – both for company and for something to do. Along with those stories, I remember hearing at least one about people buying chickens, probably the cute, fuzzy little things that grab my attention every spring from under their warming light at North 40. I love to watch them, but there is absolutely nothing in me that's inclined to take a flock home. But that's me, not the people in this story; they were buying them in abundance and taking them home to set up shop. I don't remember much about what the reporter said their motivation was; probably the idea of fresh eggs as well as trying something wildly new and different, now that they weren't spending hours on end commuting to and from work. I never did hear a follow-up to that story, which is too bad, because I'd love to know how that worked out for them. I don't mind saying I have my doubts, but maybe I'm being too negative. Maybe it was a wild success.

Not everyone finds it easy. Debbie Blue is a preacher who lives in an intentional community in Minnesota, and she's written about their decision to raise chickens. She says that while she liked the idea of self-sufficiency and her kids going out to collect fresh eggs for breakfast, she finds the birds just about as unappealing as I do. She tells that a weasel somehow got itself into the chicken coop and slaughtered their entire first batch of chickens, leaving behind a pile of carcasses. Not quickly deterred, the community tried again and purchased a second round, letting them range freely for awhile – until the dogs started picking them off one by one. One poor hen was pecked and beaten so fiercely by the other birds that one of the community members made a special shelter for her so she could die in peace. At which point, Debbie and her family decided to opt out of the third round of chickens, settling instead for getting their chicken layed out on a piece of styrofoam and wrapped in plastic, buying their eggs in cardboard cartons. (*Consider the Birds*, pages 172-173)

The more I consider the reality of hens, the more puzzled I am that Jesus would describe himself as one. Given the range of options, the dazzling colorful possibilities, the exotic winners of glorious song competitions, the strong and majestic predators, if he wanted to be a bird, why in the world would he settle on the hen? And truth be told, the image doesn't get much better if we think of it symbolically.

Debbie puts it this way:

It's a loving image, but it's not especially dignified. The chicken is not a magnificent bird – it is the most domesticated animal there is. A hen is a fussy old woman – a fat bottomed grandma in an apron pickling cucumbers... I remember the pale boy with dark brown hair my son invited to his eighth birthday party. He lived in the trailer park and he didn't have a father and he wouldn't climb the ladder to the loft where the other boys were playing. They taunted him until he was in tears. "Chicken, bak, bak, chicken, bak, bak, chicken..." I intervened, but I'm afraid it only made matters worse – as if a young man shouldn't need protecting. It is vastly different to be a chicken than it is to be a cock, in the school yard, (or) at a party in junior high. (Even as an adult,) I have done plenty of things to avoid the title.... (pages 171-172)

Maybe the word "hen" doesn't carry all the connotations the word "chicken" does, but there's no way to push either to the top of the list of things people aspire to be – unless you're Jesus. And speaking of Jesus, tell me if hen is the image you'd choose for him, or if something else comes to mind. Confronted by warnings of a fire-breathing Herod and facing into the rejection, suffering and death that he knew was waiting for him in Jerusalem, he offered it as an image for who he was and what he deeply, deeply

longed for. “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!”

Jesus as a mother hen, longing with every fiber of his being to gather his brood together under the shelter of his wings. Profoundly loving and compassionate, as well as tender and vulnerable; not exactly strong and mighty. How does that sound to you? He could have followed the lead of the Old Testament writers who talked about being sheltered under the wings of an eagle. There's majesty and strength there, as we endure threat and danger confident that we're in the presence of one that won't hesitate to soar into battle on our behalf, and will certainly return victorious. Eagle shelter actually sounds pretty good, but hen? I'm not exactly sold.

I was struck to read about a small chapel on a hill opposite Jerusalem that appears to have tried to strike a compromise between the image of an eagle and that of a mother hen. The chapel is built on a spot where tradition says Jesus wept for the city. Barbara Brown Taylor describes a wall behind the altar that was made of glass, giving visitors a splendid view of the Jerusalem skyline. On the front of the altar was the image of a rooster – a bright, fierce-looking bird made out of colored tiles with a flock of little chicks under his wings. Taylor says,

A rooster?... Jesus did not say “rooster.” Jesus said “hen,” but I think I know why the artist took liberties with the text. A rooster can defend himself. He has sharp spikes on the back of his feet that work like little stilettos on anyone who bothers him. A rooster can also peck pretty hard, and he does not wait for you to peck first. If you have ever tried to get eggs from a hen house with a rooster on the loose, then you know what I mean.

And yet Jesus did not liken himself to a rooster. He likened himself to a brooding hen, whose chief purpose in life is to protect her young with nothing much in the way of a beak and nothing at all in the way of talons. About all she can do is fluff herself up and sit on her chicks. She can also put herself between them and the fox, as ill-equipped as she is. At the very least, she can hope that she satisfies his appetite so that he leaves her babies alone. (“Chickens and Foxes”, *Bread of Angels*, pages 124-125)

No, Jesus did not present himself as a soaring eagle, and not even as an armored rooster; instead he chose a mother hen whose purpose in life is to offer shelter and love. It's an image as overwhelming as it is unsettling, in both its compassion and vulnerability. It's incredible for the comfort and care it offers, but when it comes to protection, it leaves a lot to be desired. When the foxes of the world start prowling really close to home, when we can hear them snuffling right outside the door, then it would be nice to have a slightly bigger defense budget for the hen house. Just to drive home the vulnerability in the image, one writer reflected on the dynamic of farmyard fires that occasionally threaten a hen and her babies. It's not uncommon in those situations, when folks move in to clean up after the fire, to find a dead hen, scorched and blackened, but with live chicks sheltering under her wings. (N.T. Wright, *Sermon Seeds, Year C*, page 81)

Like it or not, the notion of Jesus as a mother hen who would do everything in her power to protect the lives of her beloved children is very fitting and descriptive of both his life and his death. There was nothing Jesus wouldn't do to protect his beloved ones from the foxes that threatened them, except become a fox himself. He stubbornly refused to fight fire with fire. When Herod and his bullies came after Jesus and his brood, he didn't pull out his talons and go on the attack. He put himself between them and the chicks, all fluffed up and hunkered down like a mother hen.

I'm not sure what I find more amazing: what Jesus was willing to do to care for and protect his beloved chicks or who he was willing to include in that sheltering space under his wings. When you read Luke's gospel, it's clear that all manner of strange and wonderful birds were welcome to find shelter in Jesus' chicken coop. The gospel opens with an invitation to an aged priest and his barren wife, and then

moves on to a peasant girl who sings of a revolution in the Savior's coming and dirty shepherds out in the fields who represent those living in the shadows and on the fringe. Luke includes a prodigal son welcomed home by a father whose compassion is extravagant and whose love seems reckless, a good Samaritan in a world that believed the only good Samaritan was a dead Samaritan, and a convicted felon who finds the kingdom of God while dying on a cross next to Jesus. Those are the kind of chicks Jesus shelters, just as surely as he lifts his wing and invites us to come close.

Barbara Brown Taylor takes the image that Jesus gives us and tries it on the Church, suggesting
“...The church of Christ as a big fluffed up brooding hen, offering warmth and shelter to all kinds of chicks, including orphans, runts, and maybe even a couple of ducks. The church of Christ planting herself between the foxes of this world and the fragile-boned chicks, offering herself up to be eaten before she will sacrifice one of her brood. The church of Christ staying true to whose body she is, by refusing to run from the foxes and refusing to become one of them.

“Who would have thought being a mother hen offered such opportunities for courage? Maybe that is why the church is called "Mother Church." It is where we come to be fed and sheltered, but it is also where we come to stand firm with those who need the same things from us. It is where we grow from chicks into chickens, by giving what we have received, by teaching what we have learned, and by loving the way we ourselves have been loved - by a mother hen who would give his life to gather us under his wings." (pages 126-127)

May it be so. Amen.

HYMN No. 89 “*Our Great Savior*”

Jesus! what a Friend for sinners! Jesus! Lover of my soul;
Friends may fail me, foes assail me, He, My Savior, makes me whole.
Hallelujah! what a Savior! Hallelujah! what a Friend!
Saving, helping, keeping, loving, He is with me to the end.

Jesus! what a Strength in weakness! Let me hide myself in Him;
Tempted, tried, and sometimes failing, He, my Strength, my victory wins.
Hallelujah! what a Savior! Hallelujah! what a Friend!
Saving, helping, keeping, loving, He is with me to the end.

Jesus! what a Guide and Keeper! While the tempest still is high;
Storms about me, night o’ertakes me, He, my Pilot, hears my cry.
Hallelujah! what a Savior! Hallelujah! what a Friend!
Saving, helping, keeping, loving, He is with me to the end.

PRAYER REQUESTS

PASTORAL PRAYER

Mother Hen, Sheltering Love, how can we thank you for the welcome and embrace you offer, the protection and care? We marvel at the mercies you lavish upon us, your willingness to accept us as we are even as you invite us to try again, encouraging us to grow in love and in patience, in humility and hope, in compassion and courage. Thank you for a love that will go to any lengths and make a way through every obstacle, and always have room to welcome one more.

We pray for all those who struggle this day with diseases of the body, mind and spirit; for those recovering from injuries and surgery, undergoing treatment, working to rebuild strength, watching for signs of new life and the glimmer of hope as it interrupts the darkness of despair. We pray for families being priced out of their homes, who struggle to find child care, for whom rising prices cut deep into their ability to care for those they love. For all those whose lives have been invaded by violence, who

have been denied work or shelter, welcome or safety because of the color of their skin or who they love, for veterans who continue to be tormented by the trauma of their service, and those left behind and in harms way when others were allowed to flee. Pour out your healing and your mercy, that all might find shelter in the expanse of your wings, and that your people would learn to walk in your ways and live by your love.

Holy God, we lift our wounded, broken and bleeding world to your healing touch and compassionate, cradling embrace. We pray especially for the people of Ukraine, for those who lead, those who fight, those who carry their children to safety in another land. We pray for the soldiers and the people of Russia, that they might hear and believe the truth, make their voices known, and refuse to play a part; and for Putin, we pray your judgment on him, and an end to the lies, the killing, the war. For world leaders and their ability to make wise choices, to care for and protect the most vulnerable, and do all they can to lead us along the paths toward peace. Heartbroken and horrified at the brutality of war and threats of chemical weapons and nuclear plants, we pray for an end to the madness, and that you stretch before us your way through a wilderness in which we can see no way.

Hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken. And hear us as we join in the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

We received a thank you note recently from the Silver Hills Elementary School in Osburn, thanking us for the \$500 donation to their Bites to Go program, money which the Executive Board gave from our EAF funds. We don't often get thank you notes from other recipients of these funds, but sometimes I receive a text or a phone call in the morning after a stranded traveler has a comfortable night's rest in an area hotel. The gratitude is just as great after a warm meal, a tank of gas or help with utilities. These gifts are rarely large in amount, but huge in their impact. Thank you for the ministry that you make possible through your gifts, as you enable the church in sharing the love of God and the care of Christ's church.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Holy One, whose heart abounds with gifts, receive our offering as sign of our intention to live surrounded by your mercy, inspired by your Spirit, open to the joy of your presence, hospitable to one another, and generous toward your world. Amen. (Edwin E. Beers, *Touch Holiness*)

HYMN No. 601 *“Lord, Dismiss Us with Thy Blessing”*

Lord, dismiss us with Thy blessing, Fill our hearts with joy and peace;

Let us each, Thy love possessing, Triumph in redeeming grace.

O refresh us, O refresh us, Traveling through this wilderness.

Thanks we give and adoration For Thy gospel's joyful sound;

May the fruits of Thy salvation In our hearts and lives abound.

Ever faithful, ever faithful To the truth may we be found.

BENEDICTION

May you be blessed into the week to come – with tenderness for your sorrows, energy for your hope, a sweet awareness of the world around you, and recognition of the face of God in everyone you meet.

Amen.

(Maren C. Tirabassi, *Touch Holiness*)