

The Fox and the Hen
Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35
March 4, 2007

Thursday evening we found ourselves shaking –literally as the earth moved below us – and inwardly as we were startled and thrown off kilter. Here at church our choir was rehearsing, but they didn't miss a beat; they kept on singing as if they were the ones shaking the rafters! These small quakes may be putting a bit of fear in us, reminding us that “a big one” might strike again.

We experienced just an inkling of the fear felt by those who confronted tornados, accidents, weapons, and violence last week. Fear is an ever-present temptation. It is a fatal distraction that can overwhelm us and knock us off center. There are many threats in the world that arouse fear within: economic downturns, natural disasters, unemployment, bird flu, terrorist attacks, and kidnappings. There are also personal experiences in which we are overcome by fear: illness, injury, broken relationships. We can become paralyzed by fear to such an extent that we crawl into cocoons trying to escape. Or we may react by lashing out in destructive ways to protect ourselves.

Today we find Jesus confronting a death threat. Herod is on the prowl for him. The Herod of Jesus' adult life is Herod Antipas, one of the surviving sons of Herod the Great. Some Jewish voices called the father “Herod the Monstrous.” His reign was marked by the execution of many of the traditional Jewish aristocracy and even members of his own immediate family. His son, Herod Antipas, undoubtedly learned his father's brutal ways. Thus Jesus calls him a “fox,” a predator stalking his perceived enemy. In literature foxes tend to be clever, sly, and devious. They are often on the lookout for a victim. Foxes instill fear in others. Herod is threatened by Jesus and issues a death order. He wants to be rid of this rebel who attempts to overthrow his rule.

Jesus refuses to be intimidated by Herod. He sends a firm message back to his adversary. He intends to complete his mission, casting out demons and healing the sick. Jesus is not afraid of Herod. He will not be deterred. He stands firm in his purpose.

Jesus moves abruptly from this powerful rebuttal to his enemy into a lament for the people and the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem has a central role in Luke's gospel. He mentions it 90 times, while the remainder of the New Testament mentions it only 49 times. Luke's gospel begins and ends in the temple in Jerusalem. “When Jerusalem obeys God, the world spins

peacefully on its axis. When Jerusalem ignores God, the whole planet wobbles.”¹

On the western slope of the Mount of Olives, just across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem, sits a small chapel called Dominus Flevit, which means “the Lord wept.” Tradition holds that it was from this place that Jesus wept over the city that had refused his ministry. From the chapel, one can look out over the city of Jerusalem. The architect envisaged a teardrop as he designed the chapel.

Barbara Brown Taylor notes that inside the chapel “on the front of the altar, is a picture of what never happened in that city. It is a mosaic medallion of a white hen with a golden halo around her head. Her red comb resembles a crown, and her wings are spread wide to shelter the pale yellow chicks that crowd around her feet. There are seven of them, with black dots for eyes and orange dots for beaks. They look happy to be there. The hen looks ready to spit fire if anyone comes near her babies.

“But like [she] said, it never happened, and the picture does not pretend that it did. The medallion is rimmed with red words in Latin. Translated into English, they read, ‘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.’ The last phrase is set outside the circle, in a pool of red underneath the chicks’ feet: *you were not willing*.”²

Jerusalem, Jerusalem: the city that refused the comfort of the mother hen and was seduced by fear. Jesus expresses his deep longing to gather the people of Jerusalem into his presence, just as a mother hen gathers her chicks into a brood. In the absence of a faith-filled leader, they have fallen victim to the cunning of the fox. The mother hen emphatically clucks, calling her chicks into the safety of her nest, but they do not recognize her voice. They have forgotten who they are. Her wings are open, breast exposed, ready to embrace them, but they have fallen prey to the contagious fear spread by the fox. They’re caught up in the chaos of fear rather than embraced by the hen’s nest of compassion.

In the shadow of the nuclear threat of the 1980’s, Catholic priest and spiritual director Henri Nouwen wrote, “We are a fearful people....It often seems that fear has invaded every part of our beings to such a degree that we no longer know what a life without fear would feel like....Often fear has penetrated our inner selves so deeply that it controls, whether we are aware of it or not, most of our choices and decisions....In many, often very subtle ways fear victimizes and controls us.”³ He suggested that we live in the house of fear most of the time. Twenty years later, things have not changed

much. In fact, the perceived threat has intensified. Increased security measures often intensify our fear.

In contrast to the house of fear, Jesus invites us into the house of love. One of the most frequent commands in the scriptures is, “Do not be afraid.” When God’s messengers are sent to call people into a new way of being, the first thing they say is, “Do not be afraid.” Jesus reminds us that love is stronger than fear, though the opposite may seem true. Fear makes us run away from each other or cling to each other, but fear does not create intimacy. Fear conjures either too much distance or too much closeness. Fear prevents the formation of a healthy intimate community in which we can grow together, everyone in his or her own way.

The house of love where true intimacy is found and where we can be free of fear is found in the house of God. The first letter of John says that “perfect love casts out all fear.” The source of perfect love is God. While the fox engenders fear, the mother hen fosters love. She invites her brood into her nest where they find true security and love. Jesus desperately yearns for the chicks to gather around under the safety of his wings and be welcomed into the house of love, where they need no longer be afraid.

Those who accept the invitation to the home of divine love encounter others on the journey. They discover that they are not alone. Others share their pain, suffering, and joys. Solidarity is formed as they reside together in the house of love where fear has been conquered.

Imagine what our world might be if all fear, from personal insecurities and to global dangers, could be transformed into love. All the negative energy we expend protecting ourselves from perceived threats and enemies could be channeled into creating a house of divine love. Such a home of love would be characterized by understanding, listening, and respect. We would use our energies to cooperate instead of compete. We would not be looking out for ourselves, but for all people.

Martin Luther King, Jr. offered an image of the “world house.” He wrote, “We have inherited a large house, a great ‘world house’ in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture, and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace....The large house...in which we live demands that we transform this world-wide neighborhood into a world-wide brotherhood. Together we must learn to live as brothers [and sisters] or together we will be forced to perish as fools.”⁴ The choice in this world house is chaos or community.

Those are the very options presented in this morning's scripture. We can be swept away by the chaos engendered by fearful forces or we can find true security in the house of divine love where all are welcomed and nurtured. Jesus laments the overwhelming power of fear that lures people into destructive actions. He himself was the victim of others' fear. He longs to gather all into the nest of love where community and solidarity can be found. I imagine that Jesus continues to lament over the conflict and divisions which afflict the human race today. We are fearful of those whom we do not know. We label the other as enemy and feel justified in our defensive posture. It happens from the school play yard to the corporate boardroom to international affairs. We allow fear to create chaos.

Jesus bids us into the divine nest where he teaches us a way to live in love, intimacy, and solidarity. We need not live in fear; we can live in love. The sacrament of Holy Communion this morning is symbolic of the house of divine love. Jesus, the mother hen, invites us to come to the house of God and to the table to be fed with the bread of life. Nurtured in this loving home, we return to the world to conquer fear with love. We find our security in the house of divine love, sheltered under the wings of a mother hen.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “As a hen gathers her brood,” *Christian Century*, February 25, 1998, p. 201.

² Ibid.

³ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity, and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc.), p. 15.

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Where Do We Go From Here?” in *The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 617. Quoted by James McGinnis, “And Justice will Bring Lasting Security,” *Weavings*, Vol. 21, September/October 2006, p. 44.

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