

Luke 13:31-end – “The hen in the fox house”

Have you ever had one of those days where you feel like people are just trying to get in your way? You wake up, ready to tackle the day, and suddenly... your phone rings, your to-do list gets longer, and someone has a “helpful” suggestion that completely derails your plans. If you know that feeling, then never fear, you’re in good company, because that’s exactly what happens to Jesus in today’s passage from Luke. Some Pharisees come to Jesus and say, “If I were you, I’d get out of here, because Herod has it in for you” (I am paraphrasing of course). Now, we may be tempted to say “hold on Luke, let’s pause for a moment. The Pharisees and Jesus don’t exactly have the best working relationship. Normally, they’re testing him, questioning him, or complaining about him behind his back. Now they seem to be warning him. So what’s going on? Are they genuinely concerned for Jesus’ safety, or are they just trying to push him out of their area? Perhaps they are setting him up? We don’t know for sure, but Jesus doesn’t seem particularly rattled. In fact, he gives one of the boldest responses in the Bible: “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.’” (Luke 13:32). Jesus calls Herod a fox, and not in a complimentary, “you clever thing, you” kind of way. In ancient times, a fox was a symbol of being crafty but insignificant. They were sneaky little troublemakers, but no match for real power. In other words Jesus is saying, “Herod thinks he’s a big deal, but I have work to do, and he’s not going to stop me.” Personally, I love this moment in Luke’s gospel. It’s like when someone tries to intimidate you, and instead of backing down, you just smile and say, “Nice try, but I’ve got things to do.”

Then Jesus shifts from talking about Herod to talking about his love for Jerusalem, a city that has been a symbol of both faithfulness and failure throughout Israel’s history. And here, we get one of the most lovely images of God in all of Scripture: “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!” (Luke 13:34)

A hen! If Jesus had started out by calling Herod a fox, now he is calling himself a mother hen. This is a surprising, even humorous contrast. We might expect Jesus to compare himself to a lion, an eagle, or a mighty warrior. But no, he chooses a hen, a creature known for its warmth, protection, and persistence.... though things may not be as they seem. If you’ve ever seen a mother hen at work, you know they’re no joke. They will fluff up their feathers, spread their wings, and shield their chicks at all costs. They’ll even take on predators much bigger than themselves to keep their little ones safe. They are like little fluffy domestic dinosaurs. This is how Jesus describes his love for Jerusalem - he longs to gather the people together, to protect them, to nurture them, to be fierce for them even, but they refuse. Jesus, as the mother hen, is calling the people under his wings—but the chicks keep running off in different directions! If you’ve ever tried to herd chickens (and I’ll admit, when I kept chickens I was useless at it), you know it’s an impossible task. Chickens are unpredictable. They dart left when you want them to go right. They scatter when you need them to stay put. They don’t always (or even often!) realise when they’re in danger. Just like us really... because that’s exactly how we humans behave sometimes, isn’t it?

Jesus invites us to come close, but we’re busy running after other things. Jesus offers us shelter, but we think we can handle things on our own. Jesus wants to protect us, but we keep wandering into trouble. Yet, does Jesus give up? No. No matter how much we scatter, Jesus longs to gather us under his wings. The heart of this passage is about love—relentless, patient, determined love. Jesus knows the people of Jerusalem are stubborn. He knows they have a track record of rejecting God’s messengers, yet, his heart still breaks for them. This is the Jesus we follow: a Saviour who refuses to be intimidated, who keeps moving forward even when the road leads to suffering, and who, in the face of rejection, still responds with love. This is a beautifully Lenten gospel – it points us toward the cross. Jesus knows that his journey will end in Jerusalem and knows what will happen there. Yet, he goes willingly. Because that’s who he is. He is the one who lays down his life, like a mother hen shielding her chicks, offering himself so that others may live.

So, what does this mean for us? It means that we can trust in Jesus' protection. Sometimes, life feels overwhelming; things happen that very quickly derail us. However, Jesus, like a mother hen, invites us to take shelter under his care. We don't have to handle everything on our own. But, alongside this reliance on Jesus' care, we are also called to be courageous. Jesus didn't back down from Herod's threats, and he didn't let fear dictate or determine his mission. As his followers, we are called to live with the same boldness — to stand firm in our faith and keep going, even when the road is tough.

So today, as we reflect on this passage, I encourage you to hear Jesus' invitation. Maybe you've been feeling scattered, running in different directions, trying to do it all on your own. Or perhaps you've been holding back, afraid to step forward in faith. It could be that you just need the reminder that God's love for you is steady, even when life feels uncertain. Whatever the case, may these words from Jesus encourage us: "How often have I desired to gather you together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." That invitation is still open. The wings of Christ are still spread wide just like a mother hen. All we have to do is come home.

Amen.