

Sermon for March 13, 2022
Luke 13:31-35, Phillip. 3:17-4:1.
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- “What are ya, chicken?”
- When I was a kid, those were fightin’ words – what a kid (or a bad guy in a Western movie) said to goad somebody into a fight or take a dare.
- Usually, when you call somebody chicken, you’re accusing them of being a coward – of being too scared to do something, and implying that they shouldn’t be afraid to do it.
- In today’s Gospel, some Pharisees warn Jesus that King Herod intends to kill him, and Jesus responds by likening himself to a chicken – or more specifically, a mother hen – and Herod to a fox.
- But he isn’t saying he’s going to run away.
- In fact he says just the opposite: he’s going to keep doing just what he has been doing -- casting out demons and healing the sick – as he completes his journey to Jerusalem, where he already knows he’s going to meet his death.
- Chicken?? I think not.
- Or maybe better, if you think chickens are cowardly, you don’t know your chickens.
- My mother grew up on a farm on Maryland’s eastern shore,

- And I remember her telling me how she hated feeding the chickens as a child, because the roosters would attack her.
- Roosters are aggressive, territorial birds.
- In preparing this sermon, I even saw a picture of one standing over a chicken hawk it had vanquished.
- But the courage of a mother hen is of an altogether different variety.
- Hens are typically not aggressive.
- But they will protect their baby chicks to the death – sacrificing their own lives for their babies.
- If a mother hen sees a fox, or the shadow of a hawk, she will give a special cluck to call the chicks, and then spread out her wings to cover them from danger – the way the chicken on the cover art of today’s bulletin is doing.
- This behavior – spreading out her wings over the chicks – is referred to as *brooding*, and it’s what Jesus is referring to today.
- Now, this isn’t the only time a hen broods.
- First she broods over her eggs to keep them the right temperature.
- Then, before the chicks have grown their adult feathers, she broods over them at night to keep them warm.

- And I've heard sermons that liken what Jesus is talking about to this – Jesus keeps us safe and warm as we grow – and that's true as far as it goes.
- But it's the other kind of brooding – the kind that is protective and sacrificial – that I want to talk about today.
- When a hen covers her babies from a marauding hawk or fox, not only might this hide the chicks from the sight of a predator, it also makes the mother, rather than the chicks the target.
- And I'm told that a mother hen will die before she abandons her chicks.
- And that is exactly what Jesus is saying about himself, about what he is in the process of doing.
- This is just before the Passion.
- Herod is the fox, though Pilate and the Sanhedrin are others.
- And Jesus is about to lay down his life, not just for the people of Jerusalem, but for the whole world.
- So the metaphor of a mother hen is very apt – it is about a sacrificial love, a love unto death.
- Jesus loves us so much that he's willing to die for us – which is really at the very center of the Gospel message.
- But there is still more to it than this.
- What Jesus says is that he is like a mother hen that's been calling to her babies to come and take shelter under her wings, but they

won't listen, they won't come, they're still out feeding or playing in the yard, heedless and vulnerable.

- Try to put yourself in the position of the hen – you see the danger, you frantically try to call your little ones to safety, but they don't hear or they don't come.
- I remember once seeing someone get hit by a car on Washington street.
- One lane had a long line of cars stopped at the red light, and she began to walk out between them a few cars in front of me.
- She couldn't see the car coming in the second lane, but I could.
- I could see what was going to happen and tried to call out – but the windows were closed, and she was too far away and couldn't hear.
- Luckily, the car was going slowly, and she wasn't injured, but we probably all know what it's like to see impending disaster heading someone else's way, and they don't hear or don't listen.
- That's why Jesus *wept* looking over at Jerusalem from a nearby hill.
- There's a church on that hill now called Dominus Flevit, which means "the Lord Wept".
- The picture on the front of the bulletin – of a chicken spreading its wings over its chicks – is from the frontispiece of the altar at Dominus Flevit.

- I didn't visit Dominus Flevit when I was in Jerusalem – in fact, I'd never heard of it until a sermon Maggie Minnick gave a few years later.
- But I did see the image on cards and icons and coffee mugs at the various gift shops you'll find all around Jerusalem.
- And I remember wondering – why is there a picture of a chicken on there, next to an icon of the crucifixion, and a coffee mug with the good shepherd?
- Now I know, and now you know too. It is from today's Gospel lesson.
- And some previous generation of Christians saw that it was poignant, and important enough to build a church where they believed Jesus had been at the time.
- If Jesus is the hen, who are the heedless chicks?
- One answer, of course, is that it's those who had heard the word of God – either in the Law and the Prophets or in Jesus' own teaching – but had not responded.
- Jesus could preach the Good News, and even offer his own life for ours – but even He could not make people listen and respond, and neither can we, though it's our job as Christians to preach the Good News so they have the chance to hear it.
- If we had the heart and mind of Christ, we too would weep over the world – as indeed many do today.
- But another answer is that the chicks are not just those who have not received Christ – they also include all of us who have failed to

listen to Jesus' call at various times in our lives....maybe daily....maybe today.

- In today's Epistle, it's members of the Church about whom Paul is lamenting
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- Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.
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- Some encouragement, but also some harsh words – their end is destruction – and Paul too observes this with tears.
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- And he's not talking about people who are murdering or worshipping idols – what he says about them is, “their god is the belly!”
- As a guy who is overweight and eats too many grinders and pizzas, that hits close to home!
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- I don't know about you, but I don't always “stand firm” in the things I know are right, the things that Jesus wants for me, and

today's verses tell me that this is adding to the considerable lake of tears he must by now have shed for the world.

- Now, in the grand scheme of things, whether I cook a healthy meal for myself or go out to the pizza place, or how often I take a long walk or go the gym, don't seem all that important.
- It seems odd to speak of them as "living as an enemy of the cross of Christ."
- I mean, I'm not cheating people, or killing people, or invading a sovereign nation.
- In fact, at least in the short run, I'm not hurting anyone else at all.
- If some kids saw my beard and my belly and mistook me for jolly old St. Nick back in December, hey, it made their day, right?
- But the way of the cross is not "don't hurt other people, and otherwise do whatever you want."
- Some of God's guidance is for *my* good too – like the health of my body.
- With respect to food, most of that guidance doesn't come from the Bible, it comes from what we've learned about nutrition and health.
- But that can still be mother-hen Jesus clucking: hey, come listen to me, you need to eat healthier, you need to exercise more.
- Remember, your body is God's temple.

- And if I had heeded it more consistently, I probably would not have crossed over into the diabetic range last year.
- That's downright dangerous to my body, and it also makes me less able to be of help to others.
- In fact, the medical expenses associated with type 2 diabetes are the number one healthcare cost around the world.
- So each time my mind is set on earthly things, and I think "sure, supersize it" or "nah, I'll exercise tomorrow," it adds up over time into something that is bad for me and ultimately bad for others as well.
- And the experience of spiritual practitioners is that, if you aren't in control of your bodily appetites, it's hard to be right in your spiritual life, either.
- In fact, how we treat our bodies *is* an important part of our spiritual lives.
- This is one reason that the disciplines of Lent have traditionally included fasting.
- Of course, there are other reasons for fasting too, and there are many types of fasts.
- Bodily health is not the primary reason for fasting, but the right kind of fasting might make you healthier.
- And a fast is not the same thing as a diet.
- But a change in diet can be part of a fast.

- The Eastern Orthodox Lenten regimen, for example, involves what amounts to a vegan diet for the entirety of Lent, and also no alcohol.
- Of course, most vegans aren't Orthodox and don't consider it fasting.
- What makes it a fast is the spiritual intent.
- And I'd suggest that today's lessons give us *one* way of thinking about such a spiritual intent, and one that doesn't have to be about the belly.
- I think most of us, if we think about it, will find that there is something about which we get little nudges and reminders that we really need to change or watch out for – maybe things that are slowly harming us, or things that are harming others, or that are getting in the way of our relationship with God and others, or keeping us from growing and flourishing.
- For me, how I eat and drink and exercise are one of those things.
- Adopting a healthier diet and exercising more can be a response to God's call, a spiritual intent, running to the shelter of his wings.
- (No fried chicken wings for Lent!)
- But there are other things we might be feeling God's call to give up, too.
- For some people, their god isn't the belly, but gossip, or binge-watching Netflix, or going to the Casino.

- Or there might be things God is calling us to do more of – Call up a friend, or someone who is alone; take a walk in the sunshine; do something that makes you joyous.
- If you have something that you keep having little nagging thoughts about, “I ought to stop doing this” – or “I ought to start or resume doing that” – it may be God calling, it may be mama hen Jesus clucking to you to warn you.
- What better time than Lent to run to Jesus’ outstretched wings in response, and put something harmful away, or take something life-giving on, and live more fully into the abundant life that Jesus came to bring.
- I heard a saying once: When God wants to get our attention, he tosses a pebble at us. (Your blood sugar is a little high – got to be careful.)
- If we don’t notice that, he sends a rock. (You’re diabetic now – really got to make some changes.)
- If we still don’t respond, he sends a boulder.
- Don’t wait for the boulder!
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