

March 13, 2022 2nd Sunday of Lent

Genesis 15:1-6, Psalm 27,

Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope Philippians 3:17-4:1, Luke 13:31-35

Debie Thomas in Journey with Jesus for 3-13-22, posted 3-6-22, I have longed: <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3341-i-have-longed>. Diana Butler Bass' blog called War Is Evil, posted on 3-11-22 <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/war-is-evil?s=r>.

Let us pray: May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Holy One. Amen.

Grace, peace, to you, beloved of Christ Jesus.

Uli Koester last month completed his term as congregational president.

One of the many duties of this role is the monthly President's Column in the church newsletter.

Uli wrote each article featuring the backyard chicken coop at that Koester Kautz household
in New Brighton.

Some of you may have noticed the color photo of those brave hens in the February newsletter:

There's Maggie (short for Magnolia), Molly and Copper.

Their bold leader Martina died back in May,

and with her death came grief and a summer of brooding.

I admit that these articles have made me both laugh and cry.

Masterfully Uli managed to weave together in profound and lovely ways

the exploits of these 4 (and then 3) chickens

and our congregational experience over the last 12 months.

Though invited, Maggie, Molly and Copper aren't able to join us for worship this morning.

We're left to imagine these hens,

and hens generally—take a moment to picture them in your mind's eye.

I suppose like people they are sometimes frightened, sometimes brave.

Sometimes bumbling, sometimes graceful.

Sometimes plumped up, feisty, clucky, even squawky,

ferocious in the face of danger (or perceived danger), that threatens their chicks.

In today's gospel from Luke, Jesus speaks as God and cries,

"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!"

In the early talk of expansive language for God, some decades back

“mother hen” was often the go-to image, now it’s one of many images.

God is like a mother hen who gathers her brood.

We easily forget that in this passage, this image, “God is like a mother hen,” doesn’t stop there.

God is like a mother hen who desires to shelter her chicks, but the chicks aren’t willing.

The flock scatters hither and thither,

 darting into danger,

 peeking at weeds and bugs with curious abandon,

 crying out for care and yet not able to accept it,

 rejecting the mother hen’s attempts to shelter them under the wing when the predator comes lurking.

And this mother-hen-God grieves for her chicks,

 for the care she can’t provide,

 for their loss,

 for her identity—tied up as it would be in sheltering them.

 She’s a mother “bereft” (using Debie Thomas’ word).

It’s a quite an image, isn’t it?

And far more complex and real, multi-dimensional, than our traditions have given it credit for.

“How often have I desired to gather your children together

 as a hen gathers her brood under her wings

 and you were not willing!”

**This image, this heartbreaking image of God, this deep held love of Jesus,
is nestled in a context:**

Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, on the way to the cross.

He’s given his disciples, and thereby us, the clear indication of what is to come.

They may not understand fully - how could they?

Today we hear the warnings of the Pharisees:

 “Herod, the Roman governor, the same one who beheaded your cousin John the Baptist,

 Herod wants to kill you, Jesus.”

But Jesus won’t let himself be bullied by the likes of Herod: he’s got work to do.

 Healing, liberation, truth telling, radical transforming kinds-of-work.

And yet, the harsh edge of violence is more real than ever in this passage:

Jesus describes Jerusalem as “the city that kills prophets, that stones those who are sent to save it.”

Dripping with sad violence,

it's the in next breath when Jesus confesses his desire to gather them, protect and shelter them.

In this season of Lent, in our season here at Hope of sighs too deep for words,

let me offer three reflections.

I'm admittedly leaning heavily on theologian and writer Debie Thomas,

she preached to me and I offer it to you.

First, there's a vulnerability in today's passage, a vulnerability that we're called to honor.

Jesus pushes back against Herod, even calls him a fox,

but Jesus doesn't deny the power and the violence of a fox.

The fox and plenty of other predators can do tremendous destruction to a flock of small chicks,

and surely even to their fierce and protective mother hen.

Debie Thomas writes, "What Jesus the mother hen offers is not the absence of danger,

but the fullness of his unguarded, open-hearted, wholly vulnerable self

in the face of all that threatens and scares us.

What he gives is his own body, his own life.

Wings spread open, heart exposed, shade and warmth and shelter at the ready."

She goes on, "What he promises — at great risk to himself — is the making of his very being

into a place of refuge and return for his children.

For *all* of his children — even the ones who want to stone and kill him."

We, friends, can learn something of Jesus' vulnerability here.

Traditionally the Christian church has liked images of God's glory, God's conquest and triumph.

But there's a patience and bravery in mother-hen imagery, in mother-hen ways.

There's a humble and steady power in centering a savior who plants themselves

right in the midst of the danger and spreads wide her wings.

What can we learn about vulnerability this Lenten season?

Secondly, in this passage there's a sense of lament, even keening,

crying out for lost children, for pain inflicted, for opportunities crushed, for long seasons of upheaval.

When we're honest, many of us know something of lament.

I lament health worries that some of you are facing.

I lament the climate crisis and what it means for our children's futures.

I lament that Minneapolis kids aren't in school AND

I lament that we can't seem to find a creative and sustainable way to pay our educators
—all of our educators—a living wage.

I lament the mental health needs that are big, and need attention for learning to happen.

And I lament what's happening in Ukraine:

a maternity hospital bombed, people bent in utter grief,
the images of gnarled and burnt cars, or city buildings torn open,
the images of churches and bridges, hard-won and key infrastructure destroyed,

So much, dear ones.

Today Jesus offers us an example of lament.

He cries out for the city, for the people, for his people.

When I'm faced with too much: too much pain, too much uncertainty, too much grief,
my response sometimes is to shut down, to disconnect.

That's a good safety valve for a short time,
but Jesus' lament offers a deeply rooted spiritual practice.

Some lament, some tears and deep sighs,
can reconnect us to the world's need and God's call,
to a thoughtful, creative response.

Friends, how are you entering into this season with space enough to lament all that we face?

Finally, Jesus the mother hen calls the chicks to return.

"How often have I desired to gather your children together..."

When the temptation in Jesus' time and ours is to resist, to avoid the effort of trusting, to go-it-on-our-own,
Jesus calls them, and he calls us, to return.

Return to the wing of a savior who loves us.

Truth is, that can feel vulnerable in itself.

Our God gathers us at this wide table, feeds us with their very self, shelters us in the face of danger.

This gathering is distinctly communal, shared at that edgeless table

In a short time we'll move about,

receiving the bread that is Jesus very body,
bread baked by and for this community,
tasting the forgiveness,
lighting candles,

adding our deep sighs,
engaging the photos we're sharing,
dipping in the waters of promise as we mark again our identity as God's children.

This morning after worship we have a congregational meeting.

We'll vote to call Pastor Maria Anderson Lippert as our Pastor for Care and Nurture.

This part time role includes pastoral care and visitation, nurture, regular preaching, and worship leadership.
Like Pastor Barbara,

Pastor Maria isn't called to do it all, she's called to facilitate our care and nurture as a community.
Jesus the mother hen gathers us in the shelter of the wing, calls us home.

In this season, how are you returning again to God's care, Christ's community, the Spirit's love?

It was two years ago this week when everything shut down.

If you've got some feelings about that, you aren't alone.

The intensity of these years has left many of us broken in ways we're only beginning to understand.

I believe that this image of a God who is like a mother hen can help us in this time:

It affirms the vulnerability we have and do experience.

It makes a space for lament.

And it welcomes us back again into the shelter and protection of our savior's wing.

Dear ones, we need that. We need that especially right now.

May it be so. Amen