

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton

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Luke 13:31-35, *As a Hen*

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God is not a concept. God is not an idea. God is not an idol, an imaginary friend, or a good luck charm. God is *God* - transcendent yet personal, utterly unknowable yet revealed to us in Jesus Christ. When we think we've wrapped our minds around who God is, when we're sure we've got it all figured out, we are farthest from encountering God.

Because God is so much bigger and greater and other than we can comprehend, our best bet is not dogma. We need something a little more humble, a little more slant. We need poetry. We need a metaphor. Not one metaphor. We need countless metaphors. We need metaphors that complement, and we need metaphors that contradict.

We need songs and similes, stories and psalms.

Thankfully we receive all this and more in scripture. The pages of the Bible are full to the brim with diverse images, names, metaphors for the Triune God. Living Water. Love. Lord of Lords. Prince of Peace. Everlasting Father. The Way, the Truth, and the Life. Lamb of God. Advocate. Messiah. Good Shepherd. Holy Spirit. Bread of Life. True Vine. Friends, I could go on.

However, could all of these refer to the same divinity? And yet, what a gift to have so many ways to imagine and speak of the One God who is the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all that is. Language is limited and we are mere humans. What better way to keep us humble and amazed than to worship the God who is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end?



And then there's the metaphor Jesus employs in today's gospel reading. It's not the first time the Holy One has been compared to a feathered creature. The Psalmist speaks of a God who will cover us with his pinions and grant us refuge under his wings. It is an image of protection, a promise of refuge.

But Jesus does not liken himself to an eagle with talons. Jesus - who is God from God, light from light - compares himself to a

mother hen. I grew up on children's books featuring mother hens. I am pretty sure I've become a mother hen, to be honest. I do a lot of clucking.

I had never seen a real live Mother Hen quite like Betty, a backyard chicken who belongs to my friend Sami. I thought about printing her photo in the bulletin, but I feel like that ruins the element of surprise. Betty does best as an unexpected chicken, reluctantly modeling her handmade hat.

Perhaps you really have to be a Bible nerd to feel what I felt when I saw this snapshot. When Sami shared this photo on Facebook, I was tempted to tag Jesus.

This makes me laugh, but it's also poignant. Hens gather their brood under their wings. They are fiercely protective. This is what God is like: a fiercely protective parent.

In just a few short chapters further into the Gospel of Luke, Jesus will gaze upon Jerusalem and weep. The city will break his heart - and his body. The religious leaders and the Roman authorities will not merely reject the Son of God sent to save them. They will kill him, and he knows it.

Still, he longs to draw them to him to love and protect them - from themselves, and from the foxes threatening to take them down.

I don't suppose we always like to think of ourselves as helpless little chicks seeking shelter under the wing of a mother hen. We like to think of ourselves as more dignified, more self-sufficient, more powerful. Many of these unexpected metaphors for God come with uncomfortable metaphors for humankind. But even if I don't like it, sometimes we are chicken.

We can be fearful and frantic and foolish. If we are honest with ourselves, we certainly have moments where all we want is to be wrapped in the embrace of a perfectly loving parent. So just as I am grateful for the metaphor of God our Heavenly Father, I am grateful for the metaphor of God our Mother Hen.

We need these metaphors more than ever, don't we? I can't help but remember that the last time this text came up in the lectionary three years ago, the war in Ukraine had only just begun. And here we still are. How many beloved children of

God, created in God's own image, have been killed in the years since those tanks first rolled in?

Closer to home, how many beloved children of God wake up queasy with fear for their safety, dignity, and livelihoods? This is not the time to retell the story of Chicken Little. Our transgender siblings are not wrongfully claiming the sky is falling. The federal government is moving to erase their existence – as the gender marker X is banned from US passports and the letter T is removed from pride acronyms.

Between the relentless natural disasters, the long-term effects of covid on our culture and especially on our young people, and the pervasive sense that things are just not what they used to be, how many beloved children of God have simply lost hope?

We need a mother hen to pull us away from the edge of despair and the abyss of anxiety. We need to trust that a mother hen is drawing her holy wing over and around all the people and places we otherwise can only fret about. And we probably need the reminder, again and again, that Jesus laid down this glorious metaphor for the sake of the vulnerable - but also for the sake of the violent.

The mother hen does not exclude any of her chicks from her embrace. The text reminds us God is trying to nestle us all under the same wing. This is the scandal of God's grace.

We like to think that God's love is this glorious, beautiful thing – But isn't it irritating that it's poured out just as abundantly for our enemies as it is for our friends? Isn't it obnoxious that God's forgiveness and mercy are just as readily available to the people who have wronged us and the people we love? These gifts are extended to all who are willing to accept them. Once we are gathered under the feathers of the Holy Hen, we are all members of the same flock.

There is even grace for the fox. When it looks like the plan to take Jesus down with an unjust conviction and death penalty will succeed, Jesus prays: *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*

I'm reading along with the (Mostly) Parents book club, a book called *A Faith of Many Rooms* by Debie Thomas. The child of South Indian immigrants, Thomas's perspective on faith and culture is expansive and illuminating. I was struck by this observation: "If the Jesus I worship fits too perfectly into my tribe, then is it really Jesus I'm worshipping? The Jesus in Luke's gospel pushes so hard against his listeners' cherished assumptions about belonging that they nearly kill him. Does Jesus ever make *us* this angry? Does he prod at whatever we consider sacrosanct - our conservatism, or progressivism, our theology, our denomination, our biblical literacy, our prayer life, our politics, our wokeness - and ask us to leave it behind to follow him? If so, how do we respond?"

I suspect that question is *the* question, isn't it?

I hope we will respond with honesty and courage, humility and faithfulness. I am convinced that the God who gives us metaphors and laughter and the capacity to have our hearts broken is as real as our own pinkies. I am convinced that beneath all the layers of injustice and outrage, uncertainty and suffering there is a God who is the Ground of all Being. A God who is God, transcendent yet personal, utterly unknowable yet revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Not a concept. Not an idea. Not an idol, imaginary friend, or good luck charm - and certainly not a mascot, cheering on the home team.

Today she is the waters of life we witnessed in the Sacrament of baptism, and a Mother Hen. Tomorrow he may be a gardener and the Bread of Life. She'll rarely be what you expect and always be what you need. Thanks be to God. Amen.