SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. RICHARD C. WEYLS, CANON FOR COMMUNITY LIFE
THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 16, 2025
GENESIS 15:1-12; PSALM 27; PHILIPPIANS 3:17-4:1; LUKE 13:31-35

GOD, THE MOTHER HEN

Luke 13:31-35 *[Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "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. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' 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! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.']*

I love chickens and I cannot lie! I find the birds hilarious. They just crack me up. They aren't the most elegant of creatures. They are squat, beady eyed, and boisterous with herkie jerky movements and funny noises. I grew up in the city, so I wasn't around chickens as a child but, as an adult, I was a frequent caretaker of a flock that was owned by a friend. I would feed her chickens and ducks when she and the family were on vacation. I soon learned not to try to get the eggs from a hen that was trying to brood. It was better to stay away from their beaks because a good peck could really hurt. On one hand, I found their protective ferocity impressive. On the other hand, they were quite defenseless and vulnerable.

This became especially clear to me on a day when I chose to bring my two dogs with me to care for the flock. At that time, I was the parent of two energetic dachshunds. I guess I have a penchant for funny looking animals. The dogs were fascinated by the chickens. They wanted to play with them, chasing them around the barnyard. The chickens would cluck and flutter as they got out of the dogs' way, acting very put out. I didn't think about the one hen that was raising a brood of chicks. I saw how she remained in the

center of the yard with her wings open, chicks running quickly to seek cover beneath her feet. She didn't flee. She stood her ground in the center of the open yard, puffed herself up, while covering her chicks with her wings. I presumed she would hunker down with them, but no – she stood up tall to make herself look larger and stuck her breast out as the dogs approached. It worked. The dogs stopped the chase and approached her slowly until she landed a good peck right on the head of one her canine aggressors. Gus, my sweet male dog, yelped and retreated. The chicken was protective and vulnerable at the same time. The outcome could have been quite different if a fox had been in the barnyard.

Jesus says in the Gospel today: "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, but you were not willing."

Luke's gospel invites us to contemplate Jesus as a mother hen whose chicks don't want her. Though she stands with her wings wide open, offering welcome, belonging, and shelter, her children refuse to come home to her. Her wings are empty. This, in other words, is a mother bereft. A mother in mourning.

In the verses that precede this heartbreaking description, a group of Pharisees warn Jesus to leave the area where he's teaching and healing, because Herod wants to kill him. Jesus responds that he's not afraid of "that fox." Jesus has set his course for Jerusalem, the city that rejects God's messengers and kills its prophets. Jesus knows exactly what fate awaits him there, but he won't change course. Not for Herod, not for anyone. And yet, even as he stands up to a "fox," Jesus is a thwarted mother keening in grief. What does this stunning image offer to us for our own Lenten journeys? Here are three things that strike me as I imagine God, the Mother Hen:

During Lent, we are called to embrace our vulnerability. Yes, Jesus mocks Herod by calling him a fox. But he never argues that the fox isn't dangerous. He never promises his children immunity from harm. I mean, let's face it — if a determined fox wants to kill a hen and a brood of downy chicks, he will find a way to do so. 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. 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 his children — even the ones who want to stone and kill him.

What would it take for us to embrace Jesus's vulnerability as our strength? To trade in our images of a conquering, triumphant God for the mother hen God of this lectionary passage? Maybe what we need most this Lent is not a fox-like divinity who wields power with sly intelligence and sharp teeth, but a mother hen who calls to us with longing and desperation, her wings held patiently and bravely open. A mother hen who plants herself in the hot center of danger, and offers refuge *there*. There at ground zero, where the feathers fly and the blood is shed.

I saw the way that mother hen protected her chicks when my dogs approached. The way she stood her ground, prepared to die, with her children tucked securely beneath her soft, vulnerable body. I can't imagine a more profound or radical picture of our God. Can you?

Secondly, during Lent, we are called to lamentation. Oh my. So many of us are lamenting so much. It feels like everything we believe about our country and world has changed. The news cycle is full of missed opportunities, broken promises, and crushed hopes. We know what it looks like to fail in our best efforts to protect, help, advise, or save. We know the grief we experience when we watch something we care about self-destruct before our eyes. We know what it is to long for truth, peace, and justice and find no fulfillment for that longing.

In our Gospel passage, Jesus longs, too. He longs and grieves for his lost and wandering children. For the little ones who will not come home. For the city that will not welcome its savior. For the endangered multitudes who refuse to recognize the peril that awaits them. His is the lamentation of long, thwarted, and helpless yearning — *"How often have I desired to gather you."* It is a lamentation for all that could have been in this chaotic, clueless world.

How might you be called to lamentation during this holy season? What do you yearn for that eludes you? How might we, the Church, lament with Jesus over our homes, our cities, our countries, our planet? How might we stand with him in the Jerusalems of our lives, and weep our sorrow into new hope?

And finally, during Lent, we are called to return. "You were not willing," Jesus tells his wandering children. You would not come back. The image of chicks snuggling

under a mother hen's wings is an image of gathering, of community, of intentional oneness. It requires a return. A surrender. What in us is "not willing" to be gathered this Lent? Not willing to surrender to community? Where in our lives have we chosen to go it alone, spurning messy human connection because it feels too risky, too banal, too time-consuming?

I won't lie; loving a vulnerable mother hen God is the riskiest thing some of us can imagine doing. We'd prefer a lion, perhaps. Or the infuriated momma bear. And yet a yearning mother hen is the mother we belong to. She's the one weeping for us. She's the one calling us home, and the home she's calling us to is profoundly communal. The reach of her wings is wide. The hospitality of her shelter is vast. Her body and her heart are on the line, and yet her desire is fixed on us. On all of us. She will never, ever stop calling us home.

How often have I desired to gather you. During this wilderness season of repentance and transformation, may the longing of Jesus become our longing, too. May the way of the mother hen — the way of vulnerability, sorrow, hope, and eternal welcome — lead us home.

SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL