Betting on the Hen!
Second Sunday in Lent
Sunday, February 28, 2010
by Dr. Frank Trotter

Question: Why did the chicken cross the basketball court?
Answer: He heard the referee calling fowls.

Question: Why did the turkey cross the road?
Answer: To prove he wasn’t chicken.

Question: Why did the chicken cross the road, roll in the mud, and cross the road again?
Answer: Because he was a dirty double-crosser.

Question: Why didn’t the chicken skeleton cross the road?
Answer: Because he didn’t have the guts.

Question: Did you hear about the hen who won an unexpected literary award?
Answer: It was a pullet surprise…

Question: What did the hen say when she looked in the kitchen window and saw a plate of scrambled eggs on the table?
Answer: Oh, my poor mixed up children!

Why, you might ask, is Dr. Trotter beginning his sermon with 3rd grade chicken jokes? Well, in addition to liking classic corny jokes, I’m hoping that they might invite us this morning to meditate on hens, our Lord Jesus, and the kingdom of God.

The setting for today’s story from the gospel of Luke is the city of Jerusalem in the final days of his ministry. Dr. Alan Culpepper, a New Testament scholar, says, “Ironically, he does not travel to Jerusalem in order to escape death but in order to die there… [He] journeys to Jerusalem as a prophet.
obedient to God’s direction… His death there will be controlled by his
faithfulness to God’s redemptive purposes, not by Herod.”

Jerusalem is a place of great chaos and danger – “On one side lurks the fox
[Herod Antipas]. The Bible consistently depicts evil as dangerous and
predatory, nothing one can flirt with without risking one’s life. Satan is a
serpent…, and sin lurks at the door… The devil prowls around like a lion,
looking for someone to devour… The wolf snatches God’s sheep… As a
representative of the powerful who oppress God’s people, Herod is depicted
as a devouring fox.”

In the face of that chaos and danger, Jesus says: “Oh, 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)

Scholars have pondered over Jesus’ use of the metaphor of a mother hen and
her brood. Dr. Culpepper points out that “the metaphor of Jerusalem as a
mother and her inhabitants – or all of Israel – as children is rooted in the
then takes the metaphor one step further by comparing himself to Jerusalem
/the mother hen. Culpepper says: “Jesus, perhaps speaking as the Wisdom
of God, has repeatedly offered Israel, God’s people, his motherly love and
protection, but they would not receive him.”

In the midst of his lament over Jerusalem’s stubbornness, Jesus announces
that “Israel’s ‘house’ is forsaken,” – that the temple, indeed the whole
people of Israel, have failed to comprehend what is happening within their
very midst.

Why does Jesus choose a metaphor like a mother hen to explain what his
role was to the disciples and all who could listen? No one knows for sure,
but perhaps his years growing up in the village of Nazareth kept him close to
the earth and close to common workers. It is no stretch to say that he would
have been quite familiar with all domestic creatures, great and small.

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2 Ibid., p. 282.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
The use of the mother hen metaphor intrigued me, and I went on-line to see what I could find. Did you know, for example, that “about twenty-four hours before a chick is ready to hatch, it starts peeping to notify its mother and siblings that it is ready to emerge from its shell. This activity, which biologists call ‘clicking,’ helps to synchronize the hatching of the baby chicks. A communication network is established among the chicks, and between the chicks and their mother, who must stay calm and unruffled for as long as two days while all the peeping, sawing, and breaking of eggs goes on underneath her… The peeps [inside the eggs] inform her how long she needs to continue sitting on the nest.”6

Did you know that once the eggs are hatched, “the keeps track of her little ones by counting the peeps of each chick and noting the emotional tones of their voices [?]. When a chick becomes separated from its mother, it gives a distress call, and the mother hen dashes out to find it and, if the chick is in danger, to deliver it” 7 – hopefully, from whatever that danger is.

Even the insurance industry has learned to be wary of mother hens. In a memo to farmers that I found on line, one insurance agent writes: “Mother animals with newborns are especially sensitive to the presence of humans. If she suspects her babies are being threatened, a mother hen, fox or goat may attack suddenly, catching a passerby totally unaware. If someone gets hurt, it will be the responsibility of the property owner or his insurance company to pay the medical bills.”8

Further, a mother hen protecting her brood is willing to go into the very grasp of evil in order to save her children. When farmers talk about a fox raiding a hen house, they often shake their heads in wonder noting that the first one killed was the mother hen.

Here in Jerusalem, the holiest of cities, a great drama is getting ready to be played out. Barbara Brown Taylor, one of the best contemporary preachers we have in the United States, says that “nothing that happens in Jerusalem is insignificant. When Jerusalem obeys God, the world spins peacefully on its axis. When Jerusalem ignores God, the whole planet wobbles. If the city

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6 “Chicken Talk” by Karen Davis, PhD, [http://www.upc-online.org/stories/chicken_talk.html](http://www.upc-online.org/stories/chicken_talk.html).
7 Ibid.
were filled with hardy souls, this would not be a dangerous situation. Unfortunately, it is filled with pale yellow chicks and at least one fox. In the absence of a mother hen, some of the chicks have taken to following the fox around. Others are huddled out in the open where anything with claws can get to them. Across the valley, a white hen with a gold halo around her head is clucking for all she is worth. Most of the chicks cannot hear her, and the ones that do make no response. They no longer recognize her voice. They have forgotten who they are.

Dr. Taylor goes on to say, “If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus’ lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world – wings spread, breast exposed – but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand.”

Brian Stoffregen, a Lutheran pastor here in California says: “Offering an embrace is much more risky than lecturing. Suppose that when the demon-possessed man came to Jesus, Jesus just gave him a lecture about the evils of the occult. ‘You shouldn’t have ever gotten involved with that kind of stuff.’ That wouldn't have done the man any good. But with a lecture, we can keep our distance from other people. If they reject our wise advice – they’ve rejected our wise advice. When we get close enough to people to really care about them, to offer an embrace as a gesture of love, and that is rejected, it is much more painful. They are rejecting us.”

The amazing part of this story is that Jesus, knowing the rejection that awaits him in Jerusalem, still expresses the wish to love and protect these people. Perhaps that is why Honoré de Balzac, the great French novelist, once said: “The heart of a mother is a deep abyss at the bottom of which you will always find forgiveness.”

It is clear from the warning Jesus gives in his deeply felt lament for the people of Israel, that he knows what path they will probably choose.

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We have the same choice today: whether to remain stubbornly independent, intent on choosing our own path no matter where it might lead us; or whether to be willing – to be nurtured, to be gathered up in the protection of the Son of God. Some of us so stubborn than we haven’t learned the power of bonding, of holding tightly to one another during the hardest times, of being nurtured by Jesus who is our mother.

I saw a cartoon in the newspaper last week that showed a father sitting down at the kitchen table to write his son a letter. It said, “Dear Andy: How have you been? Your mother and I are fine. We rare see you anymore and miss you. Please sign off your computer and come downstairs for something to eat. Love, Dad.”

Almost a thousand years ago, an Italian Christian by the name of Anselm, wrote: “And you, Jesus, good Lord, are you also not a Mother? Would a mother not be one who, like a hen, gathers her young beneath her wings? In truth, Lord, you are my Mother.”

Anselm, who would become the Archbishop of Canterbury in England, went on to say: “Jesus, as a mother you gather your children to you: you are gentle with us as a mother with her children; often you weep over our sinfulness and our pride: tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgment. You comfort us in sorry and bind up our wounds: in sickness you nurse us, and with pure milk you feed us. Jesus, by your dying we are born to new life: by your anguish and labour we come forth in joy. Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness: through your gentleness we find comfort in fear. Your warmth gives life to the dead: your touch makes sinners righteous. Lord Jesus, in your mercy heal us: in your love and tenderness remake us. In your compassion bring grace and forgiveness: for the beauty of heaven may your love prepare us.”

One of my favorite paintings is Salvador Dali’s painting of “The Last Supper” which hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. Although Dali is often remembered for his surrealist paintings, he was deeply spiritual and gave the world several masterpieces, each portraying

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11 Anselm of Canterbury (1033 – 1109 C.E.), quoted at The United Methodist Book of Worship (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 398. Anselm was an Italian Benedictine monk who served as the Archbishop of Canterbury for the last sixteen years of his life (1093 – 1109 C.E.) He was named a saint by Pope Clement XI in 1720.

Jesus. In “The Last Supper,” the Lord and his disciples are shown at the table which stretches horizontally across the length of the canvas. But transcending the table, behind and beyond the thirteen men, is God with hands and arms outstretched as if to embrace not only all those at this sacred meal but also all those to whom a sacrament would be given.

When I first walked into the sanctuary here at First UMC, I was struck by the amazing architecture – and especially the vaulted ceiling which seemed to represent great wings enfolding all of us in God’s grace and care.

Despite the chaos and danger of Jerusalem – or of any place in any age – the loving care of God transcends all things. Theologian Richard Jensen says: “Human sin dwells deep within each and every one of us. Will God have anything to do with sinners such as you and me? The answer is YES. Grace and sin met in Jerusalem long ago. Grace won! So it may be for us. Our sinfulness meets the crucified prophet. Grace wins again. Grace is God’s final word on the sinful character of our human hearts.”¹³ [p. 156]

I don’t know about you, but I am betting on the hen!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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