

The Pharisees have long been the whipping boys of Christian preachers, excoriated from pulpits far and wide as uptight moralists, hypocrites, dullards and enemies of Jesus by us pastors who, for the most part, are uptight moralists, hypocrites, dullards or enemies of Jesus ourselves.

Their reputation overlooks their real and remarkable and commendable passions for the law and also for people, the common people for whom the scribes didn't have the time of day.

The Pharisees were the champions of the blue collar pewsitters, teaching them God's intentions and working hard to shepherd them into a holier life.

They demonstrate their care for people by caring for Jesus himself in this text, loving him enough to warn him of Herod's murderous intentions, teaching him the truth as they strive to do with everyone else.

They may or may not agree with Jesus, but some of them at least seek to protect him with the same mother-hen instincts that Jesus himself has for Jerusalem, or that so many of us pastors have for our own flocks.

But as so often happens, Jesus doesn't worry about what pastors and Pharisees do.

The threats we see and panic about, whether it is Herod or homosexuality, improper worship or improper lifestyle or anything else that get us well-meaning but myopic preachers so riled up and stressed out, is not what bothers Jesus.

He is not concerned about the threat of Herod...Herod is just a pretender, an impostor, another petty politician, a fox sitting on a lion's throne.

What threatens Jesus is not who is after him, but the ones that Jesus is after.

He wants to gather Jerusalem under his wings, the same Jerusalem that really will kill him, that will take his outstretched arms and nail them into the beams of a cross.

The threat to Jesus is not the fox that wants to come in but the brood of chicks that does not.

The mood in Luke's little gospel snippet shifts from the anxiety of the Pharisees to the sadness of Jesus.

There is tenderness and tragedy in his voice, a recognition and heartbroken resolve to the way things are that sounds like a man at a funeral, honest and mournful.

He laments Jerusalem, that great city that is such an ancient heartbeat of humanity, that historic crossroads of sacred stories and profound ideas, religions and their self-righteous brutality and bloodshed.

He laments the city dear to God's heart that looks so much like our own human hearts...deeply layered with zigzag zeal and passion and fear, violence and division, holiness and history and horror.

He weeps that it will not be gathered under his sheltering wings because we humans simply refuse to stay gathered, united, protected, held.

Think about it from our point of view as the chicks.

We are independent, goal-oriented, confident: we are puffed up and punch-drunk with our own power and possibility, and we loathe to admit or accept our vulnerability, our insecurity, the limits of our wisdom and worldview, our need for wiser eyes or stronger wings than our own.

Also, it is hot and crowded and smelly under mother hen.

She gathers with equal love and concern even those we don't like, the awkward ones, the fragile ones, the different colored ones, the irritating ones, the unattractive ones, the ones we disagree with, the ones who hoard attention, all the siblings we have reason good or otherwise not to associate with, and she presses us all together beneath her wings like too many commuters crammed into the morning train.

The reason this sanctuary isn't full except on Christmas and Easter and popular weddings and funerals is that no sanctuary is ever full for very long--at about 70% capacity a church looks too full to enter.

We want our space, our elbow room, at least enough that we can make a getaway if we have to.

We resist getting too close to one another, spatially or emotionally, and the thought of a mother hen gathering us all together, whether as faiths in Jerusalem or as individuals in a family, is just too stifling, too threatening for us.

We are not willing to be gathered, and anyone who tries to force us together risks getting hurt. Maybe even crucified.

So how does Jesus respond to our rebellion, our fierce independence, our stubborn and signature unwillingness to be gathered together for more than an hour?

He laments.

Strangely enough, he is not threatened, or angry; he is sad.

He responds not with punishment but with tears.

He grieves and honors our choice.

Jesus is a hen, not a fox, so he will not corner or coerce us.

He will call, cajole, chase, persuade, and woo us, but he will not force us.

He will stretch out his wings not in anger but in welcome, and when we nail them to a cross, he does not lift a feather in self-defense.

This is a hen who ultimately protects her brood but not herself.

She will die so that we might live.

And her wings, stretched out and spiked to the cross, remain forever open in a welcome that will outlast even our entrenched resistance to it.

This is not the kind of Messiah we wanted, of course.

We much prefer foxes to hens.

We cast our hopes in the image of Herod, not Jesus.

We prefer hunters to gatherers, military heroes to mother hens.

We admire those who efficiently divide and conquer rather than those who struggle and so often fail to unite.

And when we build our houses of worship, when we erect facilities to honor the God we hope will get things accomplished rather than relinquishing control and weeping and dying, we tend to build not humble henhouses but towering temples, like the one Herod's daddy Herod Senior built.

That is the house that Jesus said was left to Jerusalem with the tears in his eyes and the lonely death rattle in his voice.

That great and glorious house was decimated by the Romans about a generation after Jesus himself was.

Now, only one partial wall of it remains.

It is the Wailing Wall, a place that unites people all over the world in lament.
It is full of holes, like Jesus himself, and those cracks and crevices are filled with prayers, tiny
shreds of paper that entrust names and stories and relationships and tears to God.
The Romans have long since left, victims of the same cycle of violence they perpetuated
themselves, flattened beneath the steamroller of history that once they steered.
All of the Herods are dead.
Jerusalem, ever emblematic of the whole human story, is littered with the skeletons of
countless cultures, the smoking remains of innumerable foxes and chicks alike.
But the lament survives, as love always does.
The Wailing Wall is still standing.
And so is the crucified hen who still gathers and guards its prayers.