

SERMON FOR YEAR C, THE SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

LUKE 13:31-35

BY THE REV. TOREY LIGHTCAP  
SAINT THOMAS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
FEBRUARY 28, 2010

"HEN"

When I was quite young, and my parents had just divorced,  
My mother and my brother and I went for six months to live at my grandmother's house,  
In a part of Kansas that was quite remote.  
On Grandma's farm were all the sorts of things you'd expect  
In a small, working, self-sustaining environment like that.  
The neighbors leased her land for farming, if I remember it right,  
And Grandma's part of the enterprise was small, because there were only a few of us.  
So: some cows, a nice garden, a few mulberry trees for us kids, a stocked pond,  
And a chicken coop with maybe half a dozen hens and a rooster.

The idea when we got there was that at age four, I hadn't achieved that point  
Where I could yet jump in and do things,  
But it was thought that my brother, who was then eight years old, *could*;  
And, as we'd been living in towns, he should so invest himself, and right away,  
And learn something about how a proper farm works.  
My brother's chores were to milk the milk cows and to get the eggs out of the coop.

You know how it is with siblings; I was Tony's shadow.  
Sometimes, if he "let me," I could even do a bit of his work!

How well I recall him urging me to help him with his chores,  
Although the milking part he always seemed to get done by himself,  
Including giving a very friendly cat a couple of squirts in the face of fresh cream.  
It was more the *egg-gathering* part of his chores  
Where Tony somehow came to require further assistance.

I suspect you know what I mean.  
This is where I learned that a *chicken* –  
Surely one of the least intelligent, and one of the most docile-looking creatures,  
If it thinks it is being threatened in any way,  
Can become a frothing, screaming, clawing, pecking, scratching nightmare.  
I would approach the coop with dim hopes,  
Thinking that perhaps the hens would be out of their nests.  
Sadly, though, sometimes not even the grain we scattered could coax them out,  
And I would be forced to check for eggs under a sitting hen.  
Not a good idea.  
My brother, standing on the other side of the coop and fence, would coach me, saying,  
*Just lift it up, Torey; just slide under her and lift her up and see.*

And if the rooster got wind of the fact that I was rooting around and stirring things up,  
Well, that was it,  
And I had to beat a path for the door.

But there was an economy at work on that farm,  
And I understood at least this much:  
That if I didn't get that egg, Grandma couldn't make noodles.  
So which was worse – a little Bactine and a scratch, or no noodles for dinner?

(Of course, quite often those noodles were accompanied by chicken,  
Which made the victory of fighting for the eggs that much more ironic.)

You only have to get one really good scratch on your arm  
Before the image of a mad chicken is seared into your memory.  
She sticks her pinfeathered neck way out in front of the rest of her body,  
Makes a little threatening breeze with her flightless wings.  
Her beady little eyes get as big as they can.  
She yells a little war-whoop, and her beak becomes a sharp jackhammer.  
She knows how to defend what is hers,  
And if necessary, Her Man the Rooster, the bouncer in the joint,  
Can throw his claws into the mix.

Jesus, is, I think, filled with sentimentality when he asks, almost to himself,  
This rhetorical question:  
*Jerusalem, Jerusalem – you who've killed other prophets and will kill me –  
How many times have I thought of how much I love you;  
How many times have I wanted to put my wings over you,  
You insolent, restless little chicken?*

It's an image of God's desire to *protect, nurture, and bless* the entire cosmos,  
For which Jerusalem is the handiest metaphor,  
Even though objectively speaking, we humans will *kill* him.  
To participate in the murder of this God-man is the worst thing anyone can do,  
And still you hear the intimacy and the *longing* for intimacy; you hear the mother impulse.  
Mess with her babies, and Momma gets mad.

It is not a singular image in the Bible, actually.  
Chapter 32 of Deuteronomy keys in on it as well:  
“A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he;  
Yet his degenerate children have dealt falsely with him,  
A perverse and crooked generation ....  
God found Jacob in a desert land, in a howling wilderness waste;  
He shielded him, cared for him, guarded him as the apple of his eye.  
As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young;  
As it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions,  
The Lord alone guided him; No foreign god was with him ....  
[But] Jacob ate his fill ... grew fat, bloated, and gorged!  
He abandoned God who made him, and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation.  
They made him jealous with strange gods, with abhorrent things they provoked him.  
They sacrificed to demons, not God, to deities they had never known,  
To new ones recently arrived, whom your ancestors had *not* feared.  
You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; You forgot the God who gave you birth.”

Do you hear the lament? The pain? The chronic problem?  
God is eternally faithful, and we aren't; that's Lent, maybe, in a nutshell.  
The chicks have spurned their mother and jumped out of the nest.  
Still. God is Momma, and Momma never stops loving you.  
No matter *what* boneheaded stunts you pull.

One tradition in our world's religions has a deity being referred to  
By a thousand or more different names.  
I wonder if the term "mother-bird" ever occurs in any of those lists.

And I don't want you to miss the connection and the risk we see to this truth  
From our other readings assigned for the day!

In the Genesis reading, Abram (not quite yet Abraham) is promised a lot of things by God,  
And his natural response is to ask for some sign, or assurance.  
God makes all these seemingly obscure requirements –  
The cutting-up of birds and other animals –  
And after the sun has gone down, God's presence passes  
Between the two halves of each animal.

You can find this ritual being played out in Jeremiah as well,  
But what is it?  
Thanks to some archeologists who found an ancient inscription, we know.

When treaties and contracts and covenants were being drawn up in the Ancient Near East –  
And this was around the time Genesis was written –  
Parties would sometimes cut animals in half and walk between the pieces.  
They were saying, *If I break my promise, then I shall be nothing more than a dead bird;  
I stake my life on the claims I make today.*  
Don't miss it!  
The writer of Genesis is saying that if God is ever unfaithful to the promise to Abram,  
That God will lose God's own life.  
That, brothers and sisters, is one fierce and fiery mother-bird.

Paul has this same end in mind when he sits down to write to the new church in Phillipi.  
He's thinking of Jesus, of course, and he says that because of Jesus,  
All humiliation is past, all contractual language between God and the world is past –  
*Dissolved!* In the light of the redeeming love of Christ.  
There is only a covenant – a relationship of integrity and mutuality –  
Between God and the world.  
Therefore, he says, help the ones who need help.  
Specifically, he goes on to say, reach into your wallets  
And help these two female missionaries Euodia and Syntche,  
Whose names have been left out of today's reading, I guess,  
Only because they're hard to say.  
(Thank goodness we at least had a female lector scheduled for today!)

What *else* would the mother-bird have us do  
But hover over and look after each other?

Ignore them with our *wallets*,  
Even when their deeds and intentions in God are just as honorable as Paul's?  
Indeed, no.  
Ignore them with our *prayers*,  
Because of something as insignificant in Christ as the gender of their bodies?  
Of course not!  
Ignore them with our *time*,  
Or with our *possessions*?  
No, obviously.  
Paul says, *They're a part of this Kingdom we're spreading the news about:*  
*Help them, and stop quibbling about it!*

And why?  
Because in Jesus all things are gathered into one,  
As a hen draws her chicks close and warm under her wings,  
And she does so not to *subordinate* us, but to *transform* us –  
That we might be usable to this Kingdom.  
So much is this God's desire for us,  
That the hen would fall before the fox,  
A known slaughterer of infants,<sup>1</sup>  
And be consumed in the razor sharp teeth of an Empire, for our sakes.

You know, sometimes, when we were living on Grandma's farm,  
And I was looking at a hen who had settled into her nest and wasn't moving,  
And was hotly clucking and giving me the eye ...  
Sometimes, I would just turn away and pass through the gate,  
And my brother would say to me, "No eggs today, huh?"

I might reply, or I might not,  
But the looks passing between us said everything we needed to say.

Grandma was a good cook; she could make lots of things,  
Even if she *didn't* have an egg.

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, Sermon 375.I