

23 August 2020
Psalm 91; Luke 13:31-35
God is a Hen
First Mennonite Church



If I asked you to draw a picture of Jesus, what would you draw? A blue-eyed shepherd holding a staff? A king with a golden crown sitting on a throne? A loaf of bread and a cup of wine? A door, a gate, a light, a bridegroom? What about a chicken? Would it occur to you to draw a chicken?

Most of my experience with chickens has to do with food—barbequed chicken, chicken noodle soup, a great Chinese chicken dish called Gong Bao Ji Ding, and spicy Indian chicken curry. Yummmm!



When I was young, I visited my grandparents and helped collect eggs from the chicken coop. I also have a vague memory of running away from an irritated rooster. Other than that, my impression of chickens is that they aren't the most *elegant* of creatures. They are beady-eyed and

boisterous. They sort of fly—just not very far. They aren't graceful like an eagle, aren't elegant like a swan. Granted, they can sort of be fierce at times; I learned as a child to keep my distance from their beaks. By in large, however, they are defenceless and vulnerable birds.



To answer my own question: if I had to draw a picture of Jesus, no, my first choice would definitely not have been a chicken. Yet, here in Luke's gospel—there's a similar story in Matthew—we have Jesus's self-description: "*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.*"

Can you picture it? Jesus, the mother hen? Does such a metaphor resonate with you?

Here's the thing. If maternal *power, acumen, or success* were the characteristics



Jesus wanted to emphasize in his choice of metaphor, he could have used other more-appropriate Old Testament images to make his point. I immediately think of the passage in Hosea where God is described as enraged she-bear robbed of her cubs (Hosea 13:8). Or, God as a fearless mother eagle caring for its young (Deuteronomy 32:11-12).

Jesus was doing and speaking God's work and the powers didn't like it. When you look at our society today, we see the church no longer at the centre but pushed to the margins. We see a church that no longer has any influence or power but is powerless. Wouldn't it be better to have an enraged bear God to take our side in every argument? A fearless eagle God who will come into the Church and protect it from all the bad and evil influences?

When facing your enemy, a fox, don't we need a God who can roar? But these aren't the images Jesus chooses. Instead, Jesus chooses a hen. God is a hen. The old children's story, the Little Red Hen, was written to teach children the importance of hard work and personal initiative. Besides that, hens are not usually seen as fonts of wisdom or sources of strength, nor are we encouraged to emulate them. When I was a kid, we taunted others who were afraid with the words, "you're a chicken!" (Cluck and wave arms)

What was Jesus thinking using the image of a hen?

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, security, and shelter, her children will not come to her. Her wings—her arms—are empty. This, in other words, is a mother bereft. A mother in mourning. A mother struggling with failure and futility. Take a moment to imagine this.

In the verses that precede this heart-breaking description, a group of Pharisees warn Jesus to leave the area where he's teaching and healing, because Herod

wants to kill him. Though Jesus knows full well that Herod's displeasure is nothing to mess with (Herod is, after all, the villain who ordered John the Baptist's arrest and beheading), he tells the Pharisees that he's not afraid of "that fox." I have work left to do, he tells them, and I won't be deterred by the manoeuvres of a bully. At this point in the story, 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 mother in grief. What does this stunning metaphor offer to us for our own spiritual journeys? I want to suggest that this metaphor characterizes **courage and vulnerability**.

There are at least **two kinds of courage**. The **first** one is the **spur-of-the-moment kind of courage** when a person, in a moment of emergency, summons the courage to face an imminent danger. You see this in the person who pushes someone out of the way of oncoming traffic or jumps into a raging river to save someone drowning. Of course, such courage is not actually just a spur-of-the-moment kind of courage but really is the result of a certain kind of character. A character that is rooted in a certain kind of traits and beliefs, training and patterns of behaviour that have been developed and practiced over and over as preparation for that one moment when one has to decide will I jump into that raging river or won't I.

The **second** kind of courage is different than the first kind. It's not simply a spur-of-the-moment courage in the face of danger, but has to do with **anticipating a significant, daunting, or even frightening challenge and not turning away from it but rather meeting it head on**. This is also a matter of character – character that has emerged from a lifetime of practice and that is also being forged in the very moment of accepting challenges and responsibilities that one could avoid.

It is this second kind of courage that Jesus displays here in Luke's gospel. The Pharisees come and warn Jesus to flee because Herod is out for his blood. We don't know who these particular Pharisees are or what motivates them, and it doesn't really matter. We just know that they tell Jesus to run and save his life...**and that Jesus refuses**. Instead, he will stay the course, keep to the mission, travelling the arduous path to Jerusalem to meet his death there like so many earlier prophets of God. This commitment to embrace his dark and difficult destiny for the sake of humanity is the very embodiment of this second kind of courage.

We can admire the steadfast courage that Jesus displays as he journeys to Jerusalem and the cross on behalf of the world God loves so much. What is fascinating, however, is the absolutely critical role that **vulnerability plays in this kind of courage**. To anticipate challenge and suffering and not back away is, by definition, to make oneself vulnerable for the sake of others.

And that, I think, is important for us to note. Because, in our culture, we don't often equate vulnerability with courage and strength. With care, love, and concern, perhaps, but not often with courage and strength.

At our worst, we see vulnerability as a sign of weakness, something to be avoided at all costs. How many of us men grew up with the instruction, "big boys don't cry?"

Did you know that one of the first signs a person is scared, shaken by a profound experience or is ready to cry is that the upper lip starts trembling? The idiom, "keep a stiff upper lip" is a traditional attribute of British people, but I think it's an attribute that can be applied to other cultures as well. A person who is said to have a stiff upper lip displays fortitude and stoicism in the face of adversity, doesn't show emotion when faced with deep loss or suffering.

When my grandfather died, my dad didn't really say too much and certainly didn't show much emotion. As the oldest male in the family, I think he felt he needed to "be strong" for his mum. Keep a stiff upper lip.

At our best, we recognize the need to be vulnerable with those we care about most deeply. But we don't often see vulnerability as essential to living a courageous life. And yet in this passage I think that **Jesus demonstrates that vulnerability is essential to courage**, stands at the core of the Christian life, and invites us to discover the peculiar strength of being open to the needs of those around us.

Why does Jesus choose the metaphor of a hen gathering her brood of chicks under wings? Of course, the metaphor is meant to demonstrate God's longing to provide protection and safety, and demonstrate God's love and concern for God's people, even in the face of rejection.

This metaphor also describes God in feminine and maternal imagery, which may raise the eyebrows and hackles of those who hold firmly to the belief that God should only be described in masculine terms. I will make one point on this issue.

Throughout this sermon series on Biblical metaphors I've tried very hard to make the point that God is an overwhelming transcendent, Wholly Other presence. As finite imperfect humans, we can only speak of God's presence and action within this world by using metaphors, terms or images borrowed from human experience to express something lying outside of direct human experience. This is why we find God described as a shepherd, a king, a father, just to name a few.

The Bible doesn't just describe God in masculine terms, however. The Bible also describes God as a mineral...the Rock of our salvation (Psalm 62:2,6), an animal...a mother bear robbed of her cubs (Hosea 13:8), a bird...a protective eagle (Deuteronomy 32:11), and a soaring vulture (Isaiah 40:27-31)

Scripture also employs feminine and maternal metaphors for God, too. God is described as a mother giving birth (Isaiah 42:14), as a woman breast-feeding her child (Isaiah 49:15), a woman searching for her lost coin (Luke 15:8-10), and even a hen here in Luke.

If Jesus can describe himself and God as a mother hen, can we not also employ a variety of images and metaphors to describe God, too? Because the only way for us to meaningfully think about God and talk about God is through metaphors. And all metaphors are our inadequate attempts to speak about God. I believe we are all impoverished if we can only imagine God in the narrowest of terms. I'm a firm believer that the more metaphors of God we use, the better.

I want to continue with my question why Jesus chose the metaphor of a hen gathering her brood of chicks under wings. Finally, this image is also an image of unparalleled vulnerability. I mean, let's face it — if a determined and hungry fox wants chicken for dinner, I seriously doubt this hardly-can-fly, squat, next to no lethal weapons at its disposal bird is going to do too much to stop it. If Herod wants Jesus dead, then Herod will find a way to kill him.

Vulnerability. Where are you most vulnerable? Is it your health? Finances? The future of the church, our church? One of the things I discovered being a parent—and I'm going to state the obvious—is that **your children never stop being your children**. Parents are proud and happy of their children's accomplishments and successes, but moved to pain and despair when terrible things happen to them or when they make choices you don't agree with. Being a parent is a lot like being held hostage to fate and being captive to destiny. There is no way you can protect

your children from all the threats this life presents, nor should you! What I'm trying to say is that our relationship with our children not only leaves parents profoundly vulnerable but promises a level of suffering that you simply would not accept or endure if you had not bound yourself so fully to your child. Someone once said, a parent is usually only as happy as his or her **least happy child**. Now that's vulnerability!

And it is precisely this characteristic that Jesus embodies and by extension invites us to attribute to God – that God becomes vulnerable to all the vicissitudes of human life by becoming one of us, one with God's children through the incarnation.

In addition, Jesus' choice of this metaphor has helped me realize that it is our vulnerability that spurs our courage and nourishes our strength simply because **you can and will do things for those you love that you simply would not or could not do for yourself**. And so Jesus continues on to Jerusalem not to prove himself fearless or a hero, not to make a sacrifice for sin to a judgmental God, not even to combat death and the devil. Rather, Jesus journeys to Jerusalem and embraces the cross that awaits him there out of profound love for the people around him, a mother's fierce love that will stop at nothing to protect her children.

God is a hen is a profound metaphor of courage and vulnerability. Being vulnerable requires us to open up to feeling things we might want to avoid, but it also spurs us to be more authentically human and more caring, compassionate, and courageous than we could otherwise be. Courage, after all, comes from the Latin *cor* – meaning heart. Originally it meant **living from the heart**, the willingness to embrace our vulnerability in order to be our authentic selves. Christian courage, then, might be the kind of whole-hearted living that comes from believing that as God's children **we are enough** and that those around us are also God's beloved children and therefore deserve our love, empathy, and respect.

What if in this passage we see Jesus not merely acting courageously but embracing who he was called to be for the sake of those he loved, and thereby inviting us to be who we are called to be for the sake of those around us? What would our community look like if we decided together to live whole-heartedly, **making room to name our vulnerabilities** in a cross-shaped confidence that God is with us and has given us sufficient resources – including each other! – to not

simply endure the challenges before us but to flourish as we discover that God meets us most reliably precisely in our places of vulnerability?

So, if I asked you to draw a picture of Jesus, what would you draw? God is a hen is a profound reminder that God is with us always, especially when we are most vulnerable. Amen