

Sermon for Sunday, February 21, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Do you ever feel like somehow
somewhere
you missed out on something essential?

That's how I felt
when I read
today's gospel reading.

Last week
we were in the desert with Jesus being tempted.
This week
Herod is coming after him and Pharisees are warning him
and Jesus himself is waxing lyrical about hens and chickens.
What on earth
is going on?

The way that the gospel according to St Luke
tells the story of Jesus,
there are six main sections.
First of all
we have the stories of his birth,
then his baptism in the Jordan River
and temptations in the wilderness.
Then, in the second half of chapter four, he begins his public ministry
with an announcement in the synagogue in Nazareth - you remember, we read that in late
January -
and heads out into Galilee, the northern part of the Holy Land, to preach and teach and
heal.
In chapter nine,
after the
Transfiguration,
he begins his journey south,
looking toward Jerusalem,
continuing his work along the way.
And then there is the final week in Jerusalem,

and his death and resurrection.

And so today, we find ourselves in the middle of that section where he has turned towards Jerusalem, knowing, it is clear that there's a pretty good chance that there he will meet his death.

Because he knows, he knows that he has been making enemies.

Yes, he's been healing people, which has made him popular, and it's during this time that he's done

some of his best known teaching, the parable of the mustard seed and the good samaritan, and taught his disciples the prayer that we know as the Lord's Prayer

And he's regularly eaten at the homes of pharisees.

But also eaten

with a less savory crowd,

and he's done healing

on the sabbath,

and his teaching, well, some of his teaching

has had a bite to it, a challenge,

not least the final words he's spoken

before the part that we read today,

when he says

that the first shall be last

and the last shall be first.

All of which has made him

popular with some

but very unpopular

with others.

Which is why

today's reading
is somewhat confused.
Because it begins
with some Pharisees
coming to warn him.

Now Pharisees
are a mixed bag
at least the way they are depicted
in the gospels.
Some of them
did invite him for meals,
and some even seem to have become
his followers,
but for the most part
they are fairly antagonistic.

So when they come to warn him,
it's not clear
if these are his friends
or his enemies.
Are they honestly warning him
to stay away,
or are they baiting him,
challenging him
to do something unambiguous enough
to give them cause
to arrest him?

Either way, Jesus isn't interested
in their
advice.
He's becoming clearer and clearer
about his purpose.
He has to go to Jerusalem.
Has to go,
even knowing
that there,
there,
there

he will likely
meet his death.

And then he speaks
those tender and lyrical words
about Jerusalem
and its people,
Jerusalem
the city
that David built,
the city
as the centerpiece
for his kingdom,
the city where the temple is
the dwelling place
of the most high God,
Jerusalem
that continues to be
a symbol of faith
for Jews and Christians alike,
and a symbol
for the
entirety
of God's people.

“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...”

Have you ever seen a mother hen
with her chicks?
They're so cute, little and fluffy and yellow,
chirping
and hopping and pecking at the ground
while the mother sits quietly in the middle of them.
Occasionally
they wander back to her
snuggling in

for a moment's comfort
and then heading off again to explore their new world.

Until

there is a threat of danger.

Then she clucks loudly, puffs herself up, and lifts her wings,
and they all rush back
and push their way under her feathers,
secure and safe,
only to peek out again
when the danger passes.

Jesus describes himself
as a mother hen.

And when he does,
he draws on a tradition of images
of God as like a bird,
like in Deuteronomy,
where God is described as
sustaining Jacob, also known as Israel,
personifying the people of God,
God "sustained him 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" (Deut 32:10-12a).

And in psalm seventeen, and fifty-seven and sixty-three and sixty-seven and ninety-one,
the psalmist talks
about hiding under the shadow of God's wings.

The image of us finding shelter under God's wings
is not new,
but Jesus takes it a step further.
Because for him
it is integrally tied to his death.

The person who has done the most in exploring this idea

is St Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century.

When William the Conqueror took over England, one of the things that he did was recruit major church leaders and thinkers from all over Europe.

One of the people he recruited was Lanfranc as Archbishop of Canterbury; Anselm was Lanfranc's protege, and in time succeeded him in Canterbury,

Anselm was born in Aosta in Italy in about 1033 and entered the Benedictine monastery of Bec in Normandy in 1060, where he became a well respected theologian and philosopher, eventually becoming its abbot, and establishing it as a major center of learning in Europe.

One of his major works was his Proslogium, in which he outlined his "ontological argument" for the existence of God, where he argues essentially that anyone who understands what is meant by the question, "Does God exist?" will see that the answer must be "Yes."

In 1093, Anselm was made Archbishop of Canterbury, somewhat against his will, and worked to reform the church, and to secure greater independence from the crown. He continued his theological work, but also continued in his monastic life of prayer and contemplation. And along with his theological treatises he wrote many prayers and meditations. And among these is an extended prayer

about Christ
as a mother hen.

And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother?
Are you not the mother who, like a hen,
gathers her chickens under her wings?
Truly, Lord, you are a mother;
for both they who are in labour
and they who are brought forth
are accepted by you.
You have died more than they, that they may labour to bear.
It is by your death that they have been born,
for if you had not been in labour,
you could not have borne death;
and if you had not died, you would not have brought forth.
For, longing to bear sons into life,
you tasted of death,
and by dying you begot them.
You did this in your own self,
your servants, by your commands and help.
You as the author, they as the ministers.
So you, Lord God, are the great mother.”

From Anselm’s perspective
Jesus the mother hen
is the one who gives life to us
through his death.

One way of thinking of this, in the tradition of Anselm’s thought,
is that Jesus shelters us
under his wings
so that when it comes time
for us to pay for the consequences
for our sin,
we are hidden
and only Christ is seen,
so that Christ takes the penalty
for us.

So now, during this journey of Lent,

as we, with Jesus,
turn our eyes toward Jerusalem,
I invite you to pray along with Anselm:
“Jesus, as a mother you gather your people to you:
you are gentle with us as a mother with her children;
Often you weep over our sins and our pride:
tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgement.
You comfort us in sorrow 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.”