

SERMON: "WHERE ARE YOU GOING FOR LENT? JERUSALEM"
TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT PSALM 27
NEW TESTAMENT LUKE 13:31-35

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INTRODUCTION

I started working on this sermon early figuring it would be my first sermon after beginning chemotherapy for the testicular cancer that has spread to my lymph nodes. Five full days' worth of chemo this week in this first of four three-week cycles. I remember telling friends a few weeks ago before I started this, "I'm already looking forward to the chemo being over and I haven't even started it yet."

This holy season of lent, is in a way, God's way of telling us 'not so fast.' We want to go ahead and get to the happy ending, skip the stuff in between especially if that stuff in between is burdensome, bothersome or boring.

People often ask about travel plans around Christmas and Easter. Never been asked, "Are you going anywhere for lent?" This time around we thought we'd actually ask that question. Where are we going for lent? I asked last week, I'm asking again.

Last week the journey with Jesus took us into temptation, into the wilderness. This week it takes us to Jerusalem – the holy city which so often is not. Where to? To Jerusalem and an honest preview of the pain ahead.

Following Jesus, we're always on the way to Jerusalem. All the roads he traveled eventually led him there, to the cross and the grave. The New Testament lectionary passage this week has Jesus just outside the city. He is on the Mount of Olives, just east of the city across the Kidron valley. The city is easy to see. It is the view you see in most photographs.

It is a good place for Jesus to be mid-way through Luke's gospel. Here he can sit for a while and think about what lies ahead of him.

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' 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!"

A LAMENT

Not exactly an advertisement for the city. Not going to put that in the travel brochure.
This will be the welcome Jesus receives when he gets there. He knows it
You maybe noticed the heading over this passage is “The Lament over Jerusalem”

The Pharisees in this story are trying to help Jesus. They warn him
They tell him that Herod seeks to kill him. It is a sincere warning
But they are not telling Jesus something he does not already know
This is a lament over the city because Jesus knows what will happen there
He knows he must go there. No skipping this, No easy way out

We’ve been together in ministry now long enough for my sermons, I pray,
to feel more like a dialogue than a monologue. You talk back in your own way.
I’ve even heard an ‘amen’ or two. Pretty cool to get a Midwest nice ‘amen’
from the polite Presbyterian ‘decently and in good order’ crowd. Amen!

Our dialogue continues after the sermon. You often tell me what you think afterwards
I like that and appreciate your insights. I remember the constructive criticism I got
a few years ago (please know I sincerely welcome your constructive criticism).
It was around Christmas with me making several references
to the rather predictable storylines of Hallmark movies
I think I was being a bit snarky about the usual storylines and settings

One thoughtful person pulled me aside and said rather gently, “Can you please
lay off the Hallmark comments? I know they can get cheesy, but I like them.”
As they say on cooking shows “Heard.” So let me then tell you what I am
learning and loving more and more about the stories of Jesus. The storyline
has Jesus giving us the good news by confronting the bad news head on

Jesus’ response to this warning is to tell them he must go there
That a prophet cannot be killed outside that city,
the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!
That sure sounds like good news confronting bad news head on

Man, do I need to hear that, to know that, to trust that, to have faith in that
The happy ending I long for, that we all long for, only happens after
the good news gets to town knowing full well the ugliness that town is capable of
Only when the good news directly addresses the bad news

This is a lament over a beautiful, yet brutal city, yet beloved city
The picture you see on the screen is the view of the city from the church,
the Mother Hen Church. Looking toward the altar you look out over the city
At the other end of the small church, you will find this image

Show image of rooster

CHICKENS & FOXES

After Jesus says he must go there, he goes on to describe his love for the city using the image of a mother hen. Interesting choice of imagery, isn't it?

I'd like to highlight a few things about that imagery borrowing from a sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor and her book Bread of Angels

At risk of his own life, Jesus has brought the precious kingdom of God within the reach of the beloved city, but the city of God is not interested. Jerusalem has better things to do than to hide under the shelter of this mother hen's wings. It has a fox as its head, who commands a great deal more respect. Consider the contrast: Jesus has disciples: Herod has soldiers. Jesus serves: Herod rules. Jesus prays for his enemies; Herod kills his. In a contest between a fox and a chicken, who would you bet on?

The sermon I just quoted is entitled "Chickens and Foxes."

Those are the two images that Jesus chooses

He chooses to compare himself to a mother hen ... and he does so after he has called Herod, the Roman ruler who wants Jesus dead, a what? He calls Herod a fox

Now, I did not grow up on a farm.

But I know enough to know a fox in the henhouse is not a good thing I've heard that turn of phrase a time or two, thought I'd look it up again Here is what I found. First from the Oxford English Dictionary

Fox in the henhouse: a sly, treacherous, or deceitful person, esp. one who is secretly acting against the interests of the community or organization to which he or she belongs; an enemy infiltrator.

That does not sound good. Wouldn't want to be one of the chickens in that scenario Also found some words on the subject from the country music star, Luke Combs

*There's a fox in the henhouse ... I can't seem to get him out
I hide in the shadows 'til the red rooster crows
Let that old 12-gauge hammer come down*

So if a fox in the henhouse is a problem, why then does Jesus use these two images and cast himself in the role of the hen? I think it has a whole lot to do with the good news staring the bad right in the eye – going to it and through it, not over it with a 12 gauge or around it with GPS

Notice what a hen does. It gathers the chicks under her wings
God works in mysterious and self-sacrificial ways

SUMMARY

Jesus' lament has him say as he looks over the city

How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Maybe you noticed something a little different about the image on the screen
It is not actually a hen. I know Jesus compares himself to a hen
but the image on the wall of that church is a rooster.

Guess the artist (or church leaders) felt like the hen needed a more macho look.
Roosters can be fierce. They can fight and fight viciously
You know there are even some universities who have fighting chickens,
Gamecocks, as their mascots.

But Jesus didn't compare himself to a rooster, did he?
Again the story of Jesus is about how the good news confronts the bad news
Not by being bigger or being better at being bad. Jesus doesn't outmuscle muscle
No, this is fox as predator (sneaky one at that) vs hen (not rooster) as protector

I like how Barbara Brow Taylor talked about that contest.
I'll wrap things up with a quote from her sermon "Chickens and Foxes"
I've put it up on the screen so you can see it and hear it

Show each paragraph, one by one, as image on screen

It may have looked like a minor skirmish to those who were there, but that contest between the chicken and the fox turned out to be the cosmic battle of all time, in which the power of tooth and fang was put up against the power of a mother's love for her chicks. And God bet the farm on the hen.

Depending on who you believe, she won. It did not look that way at first, with feathers all over the place and chicks running for cover. But as time went on, it became clear what she had done. She had refused to run from the foxes, and she had refused to become one of them. Having loved her own who were in the world, she loved them to the end.

She died a mother hen, and afterwards she came back to them with teeth marks on her body to make sure they got the point: the power of foxes could not kill her love for them, not could it steal them away from her. They might have to go through what she went through in order to get past the foxes, but she would be waiting for them on the other side, with love stronger than death.

Barbara Brown Taylor, Bread of Angels