

**Sermon for 3-17-19**  
**Gospel -- Luke 13:31-35**  
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I realized this week just how little I know about chickens. Which is strange, really, because chickens are by far the most populous animal species in the United States! According to the USDA, there are more than **1.6 billion** broiler chickens (that's chickens raised for meat) living in our country today.<sup>1</sup>

More than 1.6 billion chickens... and that doesn't include egg-laying hens. Right now, there are more chickens in this country than all other kinds of livestock combined. The United States' chicken population is more than 12 times its human population. That's **a lot** of chickens!

How is it, then, that we know so little about them?

Some of you, I'm sure, are well-acquainted with the ways of chickens. Perhaps you grew up on a farm, or you have neighbors raising backyard chickens (it's very trendy these days). But if not, then you're probably like me -- relatively chicken-ignorant.

*"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!"<sup>2</sup>*

Jesus of Nazareth, our Lord and Savior, probably understood chickens (and other animals) far better than we do. He grew up in a backwater town. He was an itinerant prophet, walking from village to village across the Judean countryside. Jesus and his friends stayed with whoever would house them,

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<sup>1</sup> Data from USDA publications: *Poultry Slaughter 2017 Summary* and *Overview of U.S. Livestock, Poultry, and Aquaculture Production in 2010 and Statistics on Major Commodities* {found at [usda.library.cornell.edu](http://usda.library.cornell.edu) and [aphis.usda.gov](http://aphis.usda.gov) respectively}

<sup>2</sup> Luke 13:34 *NRSV*

and these weren't five-star accommodations. Picture goats and chickens wandering through open-air structures.

And agriculture was different back then. While so many of our farmed animals spend their lives out of public view, in large-scale "factory farms," our Holy Land ancestors were more intimately acquainted with the animals they relied on for food, fuel, and clothing. They lived with their animals, while the closest I ever get to chickens is taking my son to *oooh* and *aaah* over the fuzzy little chicks for sale at Rural King.

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

Why a hen? Of all the animal metaphors Jesus could have used in this moment, why does he compare himself to a female chicken? In the Old Testament, God is compared to a mother bear (in Hosea)<sup>3</sup> and a mother eagle (in Deuteronomy)<sup>4</sup>... but never a hen.

Jesus, who knows the Scriptures so well, has a whole host of metaphors at his fingertips. And yet, he chooses to introduce a brand-new one. **Why? What is he trying to tell us?**

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Mother hens are fierce defenders of their young. It's certainly not surprising to hear that a mother of any species will defend her young from harm, but did you know that hens are so devoted that they will put themselves in harm's way, even in the face of certain death, to protect their brood? It's true. Mama hens will run right into the jaws of a wolf or a fox to give their chicks a chance to escape.

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<sup>3</sup> Hosea 13:8

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 32:11-12

Hens may have claws and beaks, but they're not what we'd call well-armed. They don't have the shark's serrated teeth or the scorpion's venom to protect themselves, and yet... The hen is ready, at any moment, to sacrifice herself for her young. She will not abandon her chicks, regardless of the dangers that approach.

Mother hens also communicate with their young before the chicks even hatch. Hens have a certain "reassuring call" they use to soothe their developing young; and at birth, baby chicks recognize and respond only to the sound of their mother's voice.<sup>5</sup> The bond between a hen and each one of her chicks begins long before the chicks hatch; she knows them (and, it seems, loves them) before they emerge into the light of day. The chicks don't have to earn the hen's attention or affection. She gives it to them from the very beginning, for no other reason than the fact of their existence.

*OK, Jesus, we're starting to get it. You are like a mother hen to us.... you protect us, you love and value each one of us, and you lay down your life for us.*

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But wait! The hen is not the only animal Jesus names in this morning's passage. After some sympathetic Pharisees warn him that Herod seeks to have him assassinated, Jesus gives them a message to relay: "*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.'*"<sup>6</sup>

In the extended metaphor, Jesus is a hen while Herod is a fox. This is Herod Antipas we're talking about. Herod the Great, his father, ordered the massacre of the innocents after Jesus was born; while Herod Antipas, the son, had John the Baptist beheaded for criticizing his incestuous second

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<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *The Pig Who Sang to the Moon: The Emotional World of Farm Animals* (Ballantine Books, 2003), pages 65-68

<sup>6</sup> Luke 13:32

marriage. The Herods were not nice guys. They were ruthless, violent, and obsessed with maintaining power.

If Herod wants to have Jesus killed, that's a real problem. Herod is wealthy and powerful, the highest regional authority, directly under the Emperor Augustus. The centurions follow his orders. If Jesus wants to survive, he needs to high-tail it out of Galilee fast. But of course, that's not what he does.

*"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.'"*

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We tend to use the fox as a metaphor for someone who's especially tricky, cunning or sly. But in the ancient Near East, particularly among Jews, to call someone a fox was to name him as wantonly destructive, evil, depraved.<sup>7</sup> So when Jesus calls Herod Antipas "that fox," he's saying that Herod is a wicked man who delights in destruction and death. And even as Jesus names Herod for who and what he is, Jesus will not back down: "I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work."

Put the two metaphors together -- the fox and the hen -- and Christ's meaning becomes clear. He is on his way to Jerusalem, to meet betrayal, conviction and death with courage. Jesus will not let the powers of this world -- powers hell-bent on death and destruction -- frighten or distract him from his mission of love.

This mother hen -- Jesus could be a lion, or an eagle, or a bear; but in this moment, he's not. Jesus the mother hen will not back down, even as Herod the fox bares his teeth. The powers of evil cannot stop the fierce and tender

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<sup>7</sup> Eric Hermanson, "Kings are Lions, But Herod is a Fox: Translating the metaphor in Luke 13.32" in *The Bible Translator* Vol. 50 Issue 2 (April 1999)

work of the hen. The hen who longs to spread her wings and shelter her brood from harm will spread his arms out on the cross in the days to come, and we will forever dwell in his loving embrace.

Could it be that Jesus is calling us, telling us precisely what we need? The foxes of the world may tell us we need to be stronger, we need to toughen up, we need to feel less and become sharper and harder if we want to get anywhere in this life. Yet Jesus shows us a better way. The way of the hen, whose gentle courage and self-sacrificing love is a different kind of strength - a better strength, a holy strength.

We, the chicks, will always find blessed shelter together under the hen's outstretched wings. And on the third day, when the hen finishes her work? Mercy will win, peace will triumph, and love will have the final word. May it be so! Amen.