

The fox and the hen. No, I'm not talking about some children's story. I'm not talking about some Disney movie. Instead, I'm talking about the two animals mentioned in our Gospel lesson. Both are mentioned by Jesus. The fox and the hen. Two very different animals. And Jesus uses these images to refer to two very different people.

I'd invite you to turn to Luke ch13 (bulletins). At this point in Luke, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. And Jesus knows what awaits him in Jerusalem: suffering and death. And on the way, v31, some Pharisees come up to Jesus and warn him that Herod is out to get him, that Herod wants to kill him.

Jesus replies, v32, “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.’” What's Jesus saying? What does he mean when he calls Herod a fox?

In our culture, calling someone a fox might imply that they were sly or cunning. Back when I was growing up it was often used to refer to an attractive female. In that context, being called a fox was a compliment.

But in Jesus' culture, there's nothing complimentary about being called a fox. In Jesus' time, fox is a strong insult. The lion is the king of the beasts. In Jewish thought, a fox is the opposite of a lion. A fox is a little wimpy animal that thinks it's important but really isn't. The Jews had a saying: ‘It is better to be a tail among the lions than a head among the foxes.’ It is better to be the last place lion than the first place fox.

When Jesus calls Herod a fox, what he's saying is that Herod may think that he's a big powerful king. But in reality, Jesus is saying that Herod is really a little, wimpy, cream-puff, weaselly, insignificant, weak, impotent peon who's just pretending to be king. Jesus is giving Herod the verbal equivalent of a slap in the face. It's derogatory language of the highest order.

“Herod wants to kill you.”

‘Oh yeah?’ Jesus is saying, ‘Well tell that fox, tell that pip-squeak that I've still got work to do. I've got to heal the sick. I've got to fight the forces of evil. I'll do it until my work is accomplished. I'll do it today and tomorrow, and on the third day I'll have done what I've been sent here to do.’

Now, you don't have to be a Rhodes Scholar to catch the significance of that reference to the third day. Jesus is referring ahead to what awaits him in Jerusalem, the work that he will complete upon the cross. And on the third day it will all be accomplished in the resurrection. He's telling Herod, ‘You have no power over me. You're just an insignificant bully. I'm doing God's work. And besides, (v 33) I'm going to die in Jerusalem.’

And then, at the mention of Jerusalem, Jesus' focus shifts. He's no longer concerned about Herod. The fox is not a problem to him. Instead, Jesus engages in a very poignant lament over Jerusalem.

v34 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" In other words, God keeps trying to help you, but you keep resisting. He sends his prophets, and you reject and kill them. And it breaks God's heart.

Then Jesus continues, with a heartrending image that reveals the depths of his love. Middle of 34: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

There's a marvelous little church in Jerusalem that commemorates these events, the church of Dominus Flevit, "The Lord Wept." It sits about halfway down the side of the Mount of Olives, and has a picturesque and much-photographed view of Jerusalem. Since Jesus is lamenting over Jerusalem, the church is shaped like an upside-down teardrop, a teardrop about to ascend up to heaven.

And inside the church, on the altar is a marvelous mosaic. It shows Jesus as a mother hen with a halo. The hen has her wings out sheltering 7 chicks underneath her. And she looks ready to fight to the death to protect her babies. And around the mosaic is an inscription in Latin which comes right from our Gospel: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a bird gathers her chicks beneath her wings, and you were not willing!"

And the last phrase is set apart in a blood red puddle under the hen's feet: "You were not willing!"

Jesus is like the mother hen. He longs to embrace his flock. This is one of those rare yet feminine images of God's love in the Bible. God is usually portrayed in masculine terms. But in about a dozen places in scripture, we have images and analogies pointing to God's feminine side, his motherly as well as his fatherly love for his children.

In these instances, God is often compared to a nursing mother, or to a mother bird wanting to shelter her babies. To just wrap her wings around them and keep them safe. We see this deep mother love of God reflected in Jesus. From the very depths of his heart, he wishes to gather his children together and keep them safe. But no one is willing.

The pathos is extreme. Jesus stands there with his arms outstretched (*stretch arms*), but no one is willing to be embraced. The hen's wings will be empty. In Jerusalem, even Jesus' disciples will turn away and flee from him. A mother hen who wants to embrace everyone. Jesus longs to gather them up and protect them. And yet no one is willing to be embraced. He will die alone, a hen willing to fight to the death, with wings opened wide and then nailed in place on the hard wood of the cross. Jesus embraces death for the sake of those who would refuse his embrace. The mother hen takes on the foxes, fighting for the chicks.

After all, there are many, many foxes in our world. They might think that they're lions. And we might mistake them for lions. But they're really nothing but insignificant foxes. Foxes come in many guises. Some of them are human: from the petty dictator of a third world nation to the bully in the school yard. Some of them are forces that try to enslave us: substance

abuse, sexual addictions, violence, greed, fear, disease, and even death itself. These foxes are out to devour the baby chicks.

But we have mother hen who stands with outstretched wings and a heart of total love. Jesus longs to sweep us up and embrace us in his arms. Sadly we resist his embrace over and over.

So Jesus goes a step further. He opens his arms even wider. He embraces the worst that this life can offer: torture, suffering, agony, and finally death on a cross. The mother hen absorbs the full fury that the foxes could dish out. He embraces it all on our behalf. And he frees us from the clutches of decay and disease and death.

Yes, all of us will still die. The mortality rate on this planet is still 100%. But because of the cross, death no longer is the final curtain. Death is only the intermission.

And on the other side of death, God awaits us with an eternal embrace. Our mother hen waits to wrap us in her wings for all eternity.

Jesus longs to throw his nail scarred arms around us and embrace us forever. We need not fear the foxes anymore. We only need to heed our savior’s voice and trust his incalculable love.

In Jerusalem, on the cross, our mother hen opens wide his wings.  
By his blood, we are freed.  
By his wounds, we are healed.  
By his death, we gain everlasting life.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.