

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena, Illinois
February 24, 2013—Lent 2C
The Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell
Text: Luke 13: 31-35

I have been told that it is dangerous to ask people close their eyes on a Sunday morning to imagine. So, keep your eyes open, but see if for a moment, you can drift back through memories of your images of Jesus. I imagine we could come up with quite a collection. They might be majestic pictures, drawn from stained glass windows, of the risen Christ with hands outstretched in benediction. Or maybe paintings from great masters—da Vinci's Jesus at the table with the disciples, presiding at the Last Supper or Raphael's "Transfiguration." Or they might just be the more romantic drawings from the pages of your Sunday School Bibles—the tender shepherd with the little lost lamb encircling his shoulders, the praying Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, or Jesus on the hillside teaching the multitudes.

I wonder, though, if any of you would think of the word portraits that the writer of Luke's Gospel has given us in today's reading. There are two—and they both have something to do with animals. A fox and a hen. But this is no Aesop's fable.

In the first portrait, Jesus is engaged in his ministry of healing when he receives a warning from some Pharisees that Herod Antipas is after him and wants him dead. In the second, Jesus laments over Jerusalem with the tenderness of a mother hen for her vulnerable chicks who have scattered and wandered into danger and confusion.

At first reading, it may seem unclear how these images connect or what the message is that Luke is giving us. This is not one of Jesus' straightforward stories or teachings. It is not even a puzzling parable that we can wrestle with. So, it might help to add some context to try to untangle the images, the symbols that are jammed into this brief, five verse reading.

We remember that the writer of Luke is a master storyteller, one who can spin a yarn of drama and color in a most compelling way. The faithful retelling of the stories is important to him, but chronological order? Not so much. Instead, Luke's narrative is one that is shaped through movement—through the sequence and progression of events that help illuminate themes. It relates Jesus to the history of Israel, to scripture, and to Luke's own contemporary world some 50 years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection. And one of the key themes is the unfolding of God's redemptive purpose in human history. Not just a story from the past with a beginning and ending but one that continues beyond that first century and into the future.

Luke divides Jesus' ministry into three sections: first is the early ministry in Galilee that began immediately after the 40 days of temptation in the wilderness; then comes a rather extended section that encompasses the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem; and finally the ministry in Jerusalem itself that leads up to the crucifixion. Today's reading falls into the crucial middle section—a few chapters past the midpoint where Jesus turns his face toward Jerusalem and to the inevitable completion of his ministry on this earth.

In our first portrait of Jesus casting out demons and curing, we see his deep focus—maybe even a sense of urgency, though not one that will allow itself to be rushed or distracted by threats or warnings, even of death. Jesus' answer to the Pharisee's warning about Herod is surprising. It's as

if he just brushes off an annoying flea that buzzes by his ear. Now, Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee, may be more a petty tyrant than a powerful threat, but he is dangerous, nonetheless. He is the one who beheaded John the Baptist for rocking the boat! But Jesus just says, “You tell that fox...” I’m busy. I’m about my God-given purpose and nothing he can do is going to divert me. I’m going to fulfill my ministry in due time—and it’s going to be in Jerusalem, not here. What we don’t know from the text is just how Jesus said this. Was it with annoyance or impatience? Was it terse? Or maybe with a bit of humor? There is no hint.

If we pay close attention, we may hear or see deeper meaning in symbols and language. There is Herod, the cunning, sly fox who is about evil and death while Jesus is about casting out the demons of evil and death. There is a number. Last week, Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days—40 echoing the 40 years of Exodus, the 40 days and nights of Noah’s flood, 40 days that Elijah spent in the wilderness—and other key events. The number 40 represents long times. Today the number is three, “today, tomorrow, and the third day,” “today, tomorrow, and the next day,” ###a short time, a time to completion or fulfillment, maybe even a time out of the bounds of chronological time.

And then there is Jerusalem. By Jesus’ time, it had been the holy city for over a thousand years ### the center of piety and religious identity for Israel and the Jewish people. But it is also a place of conflict, power, and division not unlike it remains today. A place where prophets are stoned and killed. For Luke, Jerusalem is central to the story. His Gospel begins in the Temple in Jerusalem where Zechariah learns of the coming birth of John the Baptist. At age 12, Jesus is left behind in the Temple at Passover and has to remind his parents that he must be in his Father’s house. Jesus journeys to Jerusalem for his last days. And then, after the Resurrection, he instructs the disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they receive the power of the Holy Spirit. So in Luke’s telling, Jerusalem had to be the place where the ministry comes to an end and where a prophet like Jesus—far more than a prophet— must be rejected by the people and killed. In our reading today, Jesus acknowledges the dangers and the violence but steadfastly keeps his face toward Jerusalem.

But then we come to the second image—the mother hen lamenting over Jerusalem. And this seems in a way to be another kind of voice—not just the man Jesus going about his ministry but the Word, the Wisdom of God weeping through the ages and into the future for God’s straying people. Weeping not just for the people of Jerusalem who will reject him but for all of the people of Israel who were unfaithful, for all who were and are unwilling to accept God’s invitation—for you and for me.

Episcopal priest, writer, and teacher Barbara Brown Taylor describes the lament as what anyone of us might feel who has ever loved someone who cannot be protected. The parents among us, the teachers and priests, the aunts and uncles. The wayward and the lost are at risk of the foxes and other predators. We can spread out our arms—our wings—but we can’t make them walk into them. It is heartbreaking.

We know today that Jesus’ earthly ministry did come to end. And it ended in Jerusalem where Jesus died. But it was not THE end. For it was in Jerusalem, too, that the Holy Spirit came and the church was born to carry the ministry forward. The story did not end###in fact the story gave us a road map of how to continue, how to live not only as individuals but as the church. Remember, one of Luke’s main themes is the *unfolding* of God’s redemptive purpose in human history. In *our* history. The road map is in the two portraits of Jesus: his deep-rootedness in God and God’s purpose for humanity that gives him his focus; his deep compassion for God’s people that gives him

the desire to stand with the least and the lost.

But what about the prophets? Prophets are not so much those who predict the future. Prophets are those who clearly see what is and what should be—and name it boldly, even at great risk to themselves. They often are not outsiders, or those who have abandoned the community but those who try to bring change from within.

This is the end of Black History month, and at our Wednesday Eucharist, we remembered and celebrated the life of a well-known, 19th century African American—Frederick Douglass. And also, his predecessors, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen. The three were freed or escaped slaves and devoted Christians who found their churches patronizing and paternalistic at best. In the case of Jones and Allen, their church got very nervous when the number of African Americans attending began to increase. So they decided that the blacks should sit in the balcony. Jones and Allen took their usual places in the pews, and when they were told to move, walked out. Jones became the first black Episcopal priest and Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Some years later, Douglass left his “patronizing” church and was ordained in the AME. But he ultimately found that two wedded to the dominant society, too. His greatest contribution was influencing people like Abraham Lincoln on the evils of slavery—and resisting the notion of solving the problem by sending the African Americans back to Africa—or to Kansas.

We have more contemporary examples of prophets. Martin Luther King, Jr. who gave his life for civil rights and changed the course of society.

This month is also the 50th anniversary of the publication of Betty Friedan’s book, *The Feminine Mystique* that launched the second wave of the feminist movement. There have been numerous articles and radio programs about whether or not things are different now. What things have made life better for men and women? What is still needed. Whatever your opinion may be—we need to remember that before the 1970s, women had few rights. They could not have credit in their own names, they could even be abused by their husbands and have the world (even their clergy) close their eyes—or advise them to just be better wives or to pray.

With both the Civil Rights and the Feminist movements, it took people who were willing to stand up and speak out—being ridiculed, risking their reputations or lives. That is the only way that change has happened. There have been—and are—many others in all walks of life. Think of the Episcopal women who were irregularly ordained in 1974 because they, and the bishops who ordained them, believed it was an issue of justice and that the church was never going to move. They were prophets. Gene Robinson was, and is, a prophet. As are the “nuns on the bus” who are being punished by the church for living what they believe they are called by God to do.

And it’s not just those who have been publicly recognized. There are prophets all around us—in our workplaces, for example. People who are willing to risk losing their jobs for speaking out on justice. Whistle-blowers. I told the lectionary Bible group yesterday about how I personally benefited from a boss who was willing to give me the chance to change a piece of our organizational culture by being “a professional part-timer” after the birth of my son. Prior to that, all part-timers were lumped as file clerks (and paid accordingly). I was able to continue with my same job, complete with the travel and other professional responsibilities. Thanks to my boss.

There are prophets in our churches these days, too. They are asking if our churches have forgotten?

Have lost Jesus' road map? Have we become unwilling, wayward chicks who would rather follow the foxes of power or the hyenas of comfort and self-satisfaction? Has the church forgotten its purpose? Become unwilling to be steadfast and focused in carrying on Jesus' ministry despite distractions and danger? These prophets say that we have and that this is why our churches struggle today—the message is simply not compelling enough. That the church has turned inward to protect its institutions and its traditions, to stay comfortable, rather than using these gifts boldly to offer a new/old vision of the realm that Jesus' ministry inaugurated.

These prophetic voices call the church back to itself, back to Christ, the Mother Hen, back even to becoming the Church of the Mother Hen with its wings wide spread. But these wings are not just to provide shelter, safety and comfort in the eyes of the world. They are to gather the scattered. To strengthen and guide. To show us how to quit chasing around aimlessly in order to focus on what is of ultimate importance—even when it is risky or scary or uncomfortable. Even when the feathery wings of the hen seem to be no match for the teeth and the claws of the fox.

The prophetic voices remind us that there are many who are seeking. Might you be one of them? Are you wondering—or wandering? I know that I am. But I also know that the good news is that we need not wonder or wander alone. If we are willing, we may gather ourselves beneath the outstretched wings that have more than enough room for all the chicks and maybe even some ducklings and geese.

So, what do you say? Do we stone some more prophets? Or do we gather to recollect ourselves under the loving wings of the Mother Hen to whom we belong. And to become the Mother Hen to the world. Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.