



## WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

### **“Under Her Wings”**

**Scripture – Luke 13: 31-35**

**Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Randall T. Clayton**

**Sunday, March 16, 2025**

Many decades ago, when I was in seminary, I worked for a while in a large church located in a southern city. Shortly before I was there, the church had constructed a prayer chapel. As it was with most things in most churches, some members thought it was the perfect place to meditate and pray; others thought it had been a grand waste of money; and still others did not care much one way or another.

The prayer chapel was a two-room experience. The room in which you entered from the main church hallway was a large sitting area. There you were serenaded by a recording of soft organ music typically playing what I call a “blood” hymn – old 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century hymns such as “Are You Washed in the Blood Lamb?” and “There is a Fountain Filled with Blood” and “There’s Power, Power, Power, Wonder-Working Power, in the Blood,” and so forth. If a hymn about blood did not do much to get your heart and mind ready to enter the inner sanctum for prayer, you could traverse the plush gold carpeting and select from the songs available on an old juke box. You could choose things like “I Come to the Garden Alone” or “Sweet Hour of Prayer.” Having chosen a song that helped you get in the mood for prayer and meditation, the room would soon be filled with the pre-recorded sound of an organ that was really badly registered, playing the selection, you had chosen.

At the entrance to the inner room of the chapel, there was a bowl on a stand. Above the bowl there was a sign inviting all visitors to deposit all their cares and worries in the bowl before they went in to pray. I did not understand that instruction, as I’d prefer to take my concerns to God in prayer than put them in a bowl. But that’s me...

Moving beyond the bowl you found yourself in a small circular windowless room that was outfitted with twelve pastel-colored, overstuffed armchairs, each bearing a gold plate on the back with one of the disciples. (I don’t know if anyone ever chose to sit in Judas’ chair; it was not quite as worn as the other eleven chairs were).

As you sat in a chair bedecked with the name of one of the disciples you faced a flood lit mural that covered a very significant amount of wall space. The central figure in the mural was Jesus – life size, lily white, cloud like, hovering off the ground, staring off into space, Jesus.

A couple of years after the new prayer chapel opened, someone sitting in one of the overstuffed pastel-colored chairs noticed that Jesus had developed a severe dermatological problem. Black spots were appearing on his skin, and they were growing by the day. The church called in the experts to diagnose the cause of Jesus' disease. Their verdict: Jesus had come down with a case of mold and mildew. Jesus got a thorough cleansing, and all was well for a while. The mold and mildew returned after a few weeks. Jesus was cleansed a second time, and an exhaustive search was made for the cause. It turned out that there was a large shrub planted just outside the chapel just behind Jesus. It was pruned in the shape of a cross. The cross-shaped shrub was attached to the brick and mortar of the exterior of the chapel. That cross was actually causing water to seep inside building, leading to the discoloration of the lily-white Jesus of the prayer chapel's mural. I presume the church did something about the cross, or the mortar, I don't know; by that time I had moved on.

But what I do know is that mural there depicting Jesus, mold or no mold, gave some parishioners great comfort and helped them reflect on God's love. I celebrate that. Yet, I suspect that for others of us, me included, a different image of Jesus painted on that wall might have spoken more profoundly. Perhaps speaking more profoundly to some of us would be a Jesus touching a leper, or presiding over a meal, or with children on his knee, or maybe a Jesus who had carpenters muscles, standing firmly on the ground, looking more like a Jewish rabbi than an Anglo-Saxon man who had never seen the sun.

It occurs to me if we were thinking of creating a mural in this space depicting Jesus, I am fairly certain that it might never cross our minds to depict Jesus as a barnyard animal. Yet, that's an image that Jesus used for himself, and by extension for God.

In the text for today, Jesus compares himself not to a soaring eagle or a proud lion, but to a chicken...a mother hen to be exact. And let's face it, a mother hen has few cards to play when the fox is prowling. She does not have huge claws, or protective armor, or a beak or mouth that could tear apart an invader. She may not look vicious but in her fierce love and devotion to her children a mother hen will put her own body between the predator and her chicks, even if it means she dies so they might live. The only cards she has with which to play against that old fox are her love for her children, and her own body. A mother hen.

At the point that our text for today begins, Herod was the ruler. He had been installed by Rome to keep tabs on the Israelites, or more correctly, to make sure that the Israelites didn't rebel against Caesar, making sure that the world knew that resistance to Caesar's rule was futile.<sup>1</sup> Herod was a ruthless ruler who surely saw Jesus' rising popularity as a threat. Realizing that Herod was planning to kill Jesus, one day some Pharisees came to Jesus to warn him, suggesting that he high-tail it far, far away post-haste and cease and desist from his actions. But Jesus' did not cower in the face of that news or threaten to try to attack Herod first. Instead, he stood firm. Feet firmly on the ground; firm in his calling.

"Tell that old fox," Jesus said, "Tell that old fox that I am casting out demons, and performing cures, not just today, but tomorrow too, and on the third day I will finish my work." ("The third day," in Luke's Gospel, likely being a reference to the resurrection.)

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<sup>1</sup> Sanders, Dennis. "Resistance is Futile," *Christian Century*, February 18, 2013.

By the time of this warning, Jesus was on his way toward Jerusalem – on his way to the place that was seen as the center of the world for the Jewish people of the day, and so it was also Jesus' center. But Jerusalem was more than the sum-total of its inhabitants, more than just a city, it was seen as the place where God dwelled and where peace reigned; in some ways I might suggest, Jerusalem was as much an idea and a concept as it was a physical location.<sup>2</sup>

Having been warned to flee and having refused to cease and desist, Jesus uttered a lament about how the world responded to God's love and care: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the place that kills prophets...the place that kills those who speak God's truth when the truth is hard to hear, when it is counter-cultural, when it upsets tradition. Jerusalem. Jerusalem." Through what may have been tear clouded eyes, he continued, "How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, yet you were not willing!" It was not a battle cry, or a call to arms. There were no threats against Herod or his minion. It was simply a broken heart that acknowledged a painful truth.

"How often I have desired to gather you together under my wings, as a mother hen gathers her brood, but you were not willing." Not willing, yet the fox was prowling and stalking. That day the fox at the door was named Herod. But foxes have prowled ever since then, standing at the door to that which would give us life, trying to lure us away. And he is sly enough that sometimes he succeeds.

The old fox tells us that we need to be afraid of differences and diversity and so we kick people out, knock people down, threaten and demean those who look or love differently, and in the process tear the fabric of the world to shreds. The fox does not mind; it does not hurt him.

The fox keeps whispering in our ears, "Look out for number one. You are the one who is most important, no one else. You can forget starving children, frail older adults, and those who can barely scrape together enough for a meal. It's you and your dreams and hopes that are most important." And he also tries to get us to believe that there must be something wrong with those who have nothing. Laziness perhaps?

The clever fox keeps telling us that there's a shortage of resources so we better hold tight to what we have, that we lose when we share generously because the fox knows, not that we lose when we share, but that the world loses when we refuse to share: people starve, they die of preventable diseases, dreams vanish, churches struggle, nonprofits meeting real basic human needs close. And that is all just fine with the old fox.

The sly old fox tells us not to worry about the environment, knowing that it is much easier to use and abuse it than to treasure and keep it. The fox does not care if our disregard for creation means that crops refuse to grow, homes get flooded, or cancer rates rise. The fox does not care at all.

The fox tells us that might makes right, encourages us to retaliate when we are hurt and tells us that it is just too hard to forgive, too difficult to let go of wrongs, knowing that when we don't forgive and when retaliation is our plan, a cycle of violence is perpetuated. The fox actually thrives on the cycle of violence.

And he says, "Go ahead, make fun of others, cut others down, it will make you feel better." But of course, what the fox knows is that it does not make us feel better, it just destroys lives and communities too.

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<sup>2</sup> "Sermon Brainwave," podcast for Sunday, March 16, 2025, [workingpreacher.org](https://www.workingpreacher.org).

The fox says, “Yes, you can be spiritual without religious,” knowing all the time that it is only when we engage with the community of faith, only when we study scripture, worship and serve together that the roots of our faith grow deep enough to see us through the tough times. The old fox would be pleased if our faith did not have deep enough roots to sustain us, after all.

While the fox is prowling, the mother hen lifts her wings, inviting all of us to come to her. Under mother hen’s wings, we are not immune from loss or pain, or from flood or fire or the effects of an environment that we have destroyed. But under her wings we find purpose and meaning for our lives; under her wings we find the community we need to thrive; under her wings we learn how to live so that all of God’s children can experience life to its fullest extent; there we find the ability to celebrate the amazing diversity in God’s created world. And it is under her wings that we find the courage to resist, protest, and thrive against the dictates of the fox.

The fox still prowls, and the hen’s wings are still open wide.

Noted preacher, teacher, and writer Barbara Bown Taylor, who lives on a farm in Northern Georgia, notes that one of her favorite varieties of chickens are the Silkies.<sup>3</sup> She writes:

“They are fantastic-looking birds, with tufts of fluff on their heads and feathers on their feet. Some of them even have beards. From their beaks to their toes, they are covered with soft, white plumage that never quite graduates into real feathers. Consequently, they do not fly, and they nest on the ground...Given their evolutionary disadvantages, it is amazing that Silkies still exist, but since they show up in Marco Polo’s diaries, they have been around a long time.”<sup>4</sup>

She notes that she had heard that Silkies were really good mothers so when she had an orphaned guinea chick, she decided to see if her Silkie would foster the youngster. Carefully, she introduced the little chick to the Silkie. She continues:

“First, I lay on the grass while she and the baby watched each other through the mesh of the cage. Then I placed [the chick] inside [the cage with the Silkie]. Both she and the baby froze. The baby cheeped. The hen did not move a feather. The baby cheeped again. The hen stayed right where she was. The baby took a few steps toward her. I held my breath. The gray hen [then] lifted her wings. The baby scooted right into that open door. When I checked on them an hour later, all I could see was a little guinea chick head poking out from under that gray hen’s wing.”<sup>5</sup>

Brown Taylor says that from then on, whenever she had a chick that needed a foster mother, she would take the baby down to the Silkie pen and slide the chick under a sleepy hen. And she writes of the hen:

“She accepts all comers, no questions asked. She has never seen a chick she doesn’t like...The baby cheeps. The hen does not move a feather. The baby cheeps again. The hen stays right where she is. The baby takes a few steps toward her. The hen lifts her wings. *Come to mamma honey.*”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. “Barnyard Behavior,” Christian Century, September 19, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

The fox prowls. And he is sly and clever to be sure. Meanwhile, the hen's wings are spread wide open. She accepts all comers. No questions asked. And she's never met a chick she didn't love. "Come," the mother hen says to us. "Come to mamma and live."

Sources:

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### **Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones**

Composer of creation and pulse of all life, we come to you with grateful hearts for the extravagant gift of life. After all, we might never have been. We might never have opened our eyes to the beauty of your world; might never have seen the incomprehensible number of stars that decorate the night sky. We might never have tasted cool, fresh water, or floated down a rushing river or bobbed like a cork in the waves of the ocean. We might never have seen a perky batch of yellow jonquils, a stately lavender iris, or a lover's scarlet rose. We might never have been cheered by chirping finches, inspired by words of a wise teacher or been brought to tears by a piece of music. We might never have hiked a mountain, run a race, swung a racket or ridden a bike. We might never have been held in the arms of a parent, experienced the delight of a close friendship, or fallen in love. We might never have known the triumph of overcoming a hefty challenge, the relief of surviving a storm, or the hope that comes with faith.

Gracious God, we take too much for granted. We routinely overlook the beauty that surrounds us, we miss chances to deepen our connection to others, and we fail to speak words of gratitude for your bountiful gifts. Help us to be fully awake in each moment and glean the possibilities that emerge minute by minute. May we hear your whispers in the depths of our souls, urging us to live and to love with the generous spirit of Jesus, knowing that when we care for others we draw closer to you.

Everlasting One, we are living in a time of turbulence and divisiveness.

When we encounter pain, fashion us into instruments of healing.

When we meet sadness, inspire us to extend sympathy.

When we witness hate, spur us to acts of kindness.

When we spot deception, infuse us with courage to speak the truth.

When we come across prejudice, arouse us to show respect.

When we witness injustice, propel us to stand for what is right.

When we detect greed, motivate us to work for the common good.

When we fear, grant us strength to persevere.

Life-giving Spirit, fill our hearts with compassion, our minds with wisdom, and our souls with hope, that we may embrace the life you call us to live and taste the joy of a life of faith.

Now, hear us as we pray the pray Jesus taught us to pray together, saying, **“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**