

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

March 16, 2025 (2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year C)  
Luke 13:31-35

“Run! Go now! Save yourself!” That was the Pharisee's advice to Jesus in our gospel reading: “Give it up. Herod’s after you. He has you marked for death. Get out of town. Give up this mission.”

But when Jesus hears the Pharisees warning, he SURPRISES them by COMPLETELY DISREGARDING it. He DISMISSES the threat of Herod. Jesus has his OWN schedule, his OWN agenda, his OWN mission to fulfill, and the time-frame has ALREADY been determined. Herod is nothing but a “predatory fox,” Jesus says, DESTRUCTIVE, but ULTIMATELY POWERLESS against GOD'S MISSION in the world.

The Pharisees say “go,” but Jesus turns it around on them, and says, “YOU go – go BACK to Herod. I’M going to Jerusalem.”

You see, Jesus WILL give up. He’ll give HIMSELF up, but not in THAT place, not on THAT day. Jesus’ destiny is SET, and he WON’T be SWAYED from it. He KNOWS what he needs to do, and he won’t let ANY-thing or any-ONE STOP him from DOING it. He’ll travel to Jerusalem and MEET the tragic tradition of that city: “Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it” (v.34). Jesus will give up EVERYTHING, his very life, in ORDER to fulfill his MISSION of salvation.

I’ve often marveled at the COURAGE of Jesus here. To openly CHALLENGE Herod like this is to challenge the authority that was GIVEN to him by the Roman emperor. Remember, Herod had already beheaded John the Baptist. These are DANGEROUS, DEFIANT words.

But THEN ... then Jesus’ words take a completely DIFFERENT tone. Jesus laments over Jerusalem. He says, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.” It turns out, his words DIDN’T come from a place of anger, but of LOVE. But COURAGE and LOVE aren’t so DIFFERENT as we might think.

We’re ACCUSTOMED to thinking of God as a source of SAFETY. We sing HYMNS about it, like “ROCK of ages, cleft for me.” But we’re probably not as used to thinking of God as a MOTHER HEN. Usually, when we compare someone to a CHICKEN we’re not giving them a COMPLEMENT. But one trait of a mother hen that we have to ADMIRE is that she’s TENACIOUS and TIRELESS in protecting her chicks.

Have you ever seen a chicken HAWK go after its prey? The mother hen is often aware of the hawk in time to gather her chicks under her wings. With a furious fuss she squawks till her brood is safe by her side. She fluffs out her wings and protects them with her own body. The chicken hawk dives, and the hen URNS her body toward him and cocks a wary eye without moving from her children. The predator comes in again for the kill, and the mother spreads her wings even wider. A third time he dives only to be thwarted by the determined self-sacrifice of the mother hen. She’s too BIG to be a TARGET, and the chicks are too PROTECTED to be TAKEN, so she gives up and flies away.

You see, when a hen senses danger, she won’t REST until her entire brood is SAFE under her wings.

And THINK about that a second. What is she DOING? Stretching out her wings like that makes her vulnerable. What’s she doing? She’s SACRIFICING HERSELF. She’s offering HERSELF in exchange for her children. COURAGE and LOVE aren’t so DIFFERENT as we might think.

Jesus says that’s what GOD is like.

Have you ever heard of Hazel Miner? I served for 6 years in North Dakota and Hazel Miner is something of a North Dakota legend. She lived in Oliver County, near Center, North Dakota. It was mid-March in 1920 when an unexpected blizzard hit the plains and took everyone by surprise. Now

this was in the days before school buses, so the school let out early so the kids could get home before it got too bad.

But it was ALREADY too late for Hazel. You see, Hazel was a farmer's daughter, and the farm was a long way out. She was only 15 years old, but she was responsible for her younger brother Emmet and sister Myrdrith. She bundled them up tight, hitched up the sleigh and left the tiny school house. On the way home, the blinding white of the storm caused Hazel to lose her way. For half a day, she led her horse through the storm, but eventually, not knowing where they were, they found themselves at the bottom of ravine, where the steep slope tipped their sleigh over.

Hazel knew that the only way they could survive was to somehow stay out of the wind. But the wind was too strong and nothing worked for shelter. So she had her brother and sister lie down in the snow, and she covered them with a blanket, and with nothing else to secure the blanket, she laid her own body over them. And that's where she STAYED, ALL night.

The next day the storm ended and the searchers came. They found them at 2 in the afternoon. Hazel's horse was STILL STANDING, FROZEN to death.

Then they spotted Hazel in the snow. They went to her, but of course they were FAR too late to SAVE her. But as they lifted her body and pulled back the blanket, they were AMAZED, because Hazel's little brother and sister were still alive under the protection of her arms.

Hazel Miner gave up her life so her brother and sister might live. That's how DEEPLY God loves EACH of YOU. "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings."

And so, Jesus continues ON to Jerusalem, not to PROVE HIMSELF FEARLESS or a HERO, or to SATISFY an ANGRY God; Jesus marches to Jerusalem and EMBRACES the CROSS that AWAITS him there, out of PURE AND PROFOUND LOVE for US, a MOTHER'S FIERCE love, that will stop at NOTHING to protect her children.

And THEN ... you can almost hear Jesus' HEART BREAKING as he says, "And you were not WILLING!" "I want to save you, but YOU WON'T LET me."

Imagine. Imagine for a moment that you're at home with your children. Suddenly the fire alarms go off and you realize your children are in TERRIBLE DANGER. You CALL for them but they don't answer. You run to their room, but it's as if they're HIDING from you. You finally find them trembling under their beds and you PLEAD with them to come out and follow you to safety, but they REFUSE to COME. You try to REACH them but they pull away. They WON'T come and there's NOTHING you can do.

How often have I longed to protect you, "and you were NOT WILLING!" Can you IMAGINE Jesus' SADNESS SAYING those words?

WE are those children.

What IS it in us that KEEPS Jesus at a distance? For some, it's stubborn independence: "I don't need any help. I'm doing just fine on my own, thanks!"

Some don't think they DESERVE to be loved that deeply. They feel so UNWORTHY, that even as Jesus spreads his wings to cover them, they scurry away.

Whatever the reason, EACH of us have our OWN reason – reasons to KEEP Jesus from getting TOO close.

And this is the thing: Jesus doesn't PREVENT that. He can walk on water and raise the dead, but he will NOT MAKE us love him. He desires our love, but he WON'T FORCE it. You can't save someone who doesn't WANT to be saved. He won't STOP us from slamming the door in his face, even though we're DEFENSELESS against the PREDATORS waiting in the shadows.

So WHAT IS his PLAN then? What is Jesus going to DO with us?

Well, his plan is STILL the SAME – to KEEP OFFERING the love of a mother hen, KEEP spreading his wings. He gives his LIFE for us. He follows us INTO the darkness we've CHOSEN for ourselves, over and over again, and he places himself BETWEEN us and the darkness.

And if you look closely at this cross, you see how. The arms of the man hanging on this cross are ETERNALLY OUTSTRETCHED. And the SPAN of his reach stretches as FAR as the EAST is from the WEST. THOSE ARMS will FOREVER resemble the loving WINGS of a mother hen,

GATHERING up her chicks in a LOVE that's WILLING to give up EVERYTHING, for YOU, willing to DIE for you, so that YOU can LIVE.

God IS watching over us and protecting us, and no matter WHAT we're afraid of, we can TURN to our God. God will take care of you.

Even if the world rises up against you, or YOUR world falls down around you, God is THERE to PROTECT you. God is there to comfort you, to nurture you, to feed you. And God will NOT give up on you. God will KEEP REACHING for you. God will KEEP CALLING you...to the place where you belong – UNDER her WINGS. Amen.