

Luke 13: 31-35

IF I ASKED YOU TO DRAW A PICTURE OF JESUS, WHAT WOULD YOU DRAW? A SHEPHERD HOLDING A STAFF? A LOAF OF BREAD AND A CUP OF WINE? A DOOR, A GATE, A LIGHT, A BRIDEGROOM? WHAT ABOUT A CHICKEN? WOULD IT OCCUR TO YOU TO DRAW A CHICKEN?

EVERY SUMMER I WORK NEW STUDENT ORIENTATION ON CAMPUS AND ONE OF MY CO-WORKERS HAS CHICKENS AND I LOVE LOOKING AT HER PICTURES AND HEARING HER STORIES. TO AN OBSERVER THEY LOOK HILARIOUS AS THEY AREN'T THE MOST ELEGANT OF CREATURES. THEY ARE SQUAT AND BEADY-EYED, NOSY AND BOISTEROUS. THEY CAN'T FLY TO SAVE THEMSELVES, AND THEY MAKE THE FUNNIEST NOISES. THEY CAN BE FIERCE WHEN THEY WANT TO. YET SHE TOLD ME THEY CAN ALSO BE DEFENSELESS AND SOMETIMES VULNERABLE.

REMINDED ME OF JESUS'S STARTLING SELF-DESCRIPTION IN OUR GOSPEL READING:

"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, BUT YOU WERE NOT WILLING."

CAN YOU PICTURE WHAT JESUS IS DESCRIBING? OUR GOD, A MOTHER HEN? A MOTHER HEN WHOSE CHICKS REJECT HER?

HERE'S WHAT I FIND SO STARTLING ABOUT THE IMAGE. IF MATERNAL POWER OR SUCCESS WERE THE CHARACTERISTICS JESUS WANTED TO EMPHASIZE IN HIS CHOICE OF METAPHOR, HE COULD HAVE USED ANY NUMBER OF MORE APPROPRIATE OLD TESTAMENT IMAGES TO MAKE HIS POINT. GOD AS ENRAGED SHE-BEAR (HOSEA 13: 8). GOD AS SOARING MOTHER EAGLE (DEUTERONOMY 32: 11-12). GOD AS LABORING WOMAN (ISAIAH 42:14). GOD AS MOM OF A HEALTHY, HAPPY TODDLER (PSALM 131:2). GOD AS SKILLED MIDWIFE (PSALM 22: 9-10). BUT THOSE ARE NOT THE IMAGES HE CHOOSES. INSTEAD, ON THIS SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, LUKE'S GOSPEL INVITES US TO CONTEMPLATE JESUS AS A MOTHER HEN WHOSE CHICKS DON'T WANT HER. THOUGH SHE STANDS WITH HER WINGS WIDE OPEN, OFFERING WELCOME, BELONGING, AND SHELTER, HER CHILDREN REFUSE TO COME HOME TO HER. HER WINGS—HER ARMS—ARE EMPTY. THIS, IN OTHER WORDS, IS A MOTHER BEREFT. A MOTHER IN MOURNING. A MOTHER STRUGGLING WITH FAILURE AND FUTILITY.

IN THE VERSES RIGHT BEFORE THIS HEARTBREAKING DESCRIPTION, A GROUP OF PHARISEES WARN JESUS TO LEAVE THE AREA WHERE HE'S TEACHING AND HEALING, BECAUSE HEROD WANTS TO KILL HIM. THOUGH JESUS KNOWS FULL WELL THAT HEROD'S DISPLEASURE IS NOTHING TO MESS WITH (AFTER ALL, THIS IS THE HEROD WHO ORDERED JOHN THE BAPTIST'S ARREST AND BEHEADING), HE TELLS THE PHARISEES THAT HE'S NOT AFRAID OF THE FOX. I HAVE WORK LEFT TO DO, HE TELLS THEM, AND I WON'T BE DETERRED BY THAT BULLY.

AT THIS POINT IN THE STORY, JESUS HAS SET HIS COURSE FOR JERUSALEM, THE CITY THAT REJECTS GOD'S MESSENGERS AND KILLS THE PROPHETS. JESUS KNOWS EXACTLY WHAT FATE AWAITS HIM THERE, BUT HE WON'T CHANGE COURSE. NOT FOR HEROD, NOT FOR ANYONE.

AND YET, EVEN AS HE STANDS UP TO THE FOX, JESUS IS A MOTHER IN GRIEF. WHAT DOES THIS STUNNING IMAGE OFFER TO US FOR OUR OWN LENTEN JOURNEY?

WHAT WOULD IT TAKE FOR US TO EMBRACE JESUS'S VULNERABILITY AS OUR STRENGTH? AS A MOTHER HEN WHO CALLS TO US WITH LONGING AND DESPERATION, HER WINGS HELD PATIENTLY AND BRAVELY OPEN. A MOTHER HEN WHO PLANTS HERSELF IN THE HOT CENTER OF DANGER, AND OFFERS REFUGE THERE. THERE WHERE FEATHERS FLY AND BLOOD MIGHT BE SHED. HAVE YOU EVER SEEN A HEN GATHER HER CHICKS UNDER HER WINGS WHEN A PREDATOR APPROACHES? THE WAY SHE SWELLS WITH INDIGNATION, FEAR, AND COURAGE. THE WAY SHE STANDS HER GROUND. THE WAY SHE PREPARES TO DIE IF SHE HAS TO, HER CHILDREN TUCKED SECURELY BENEATH HER SOFT, VULNERABLE BODY. I CAN'T IMAGINE A MORE PROFOUND PICTURE OF OUR GOD. CAN YOU?

SECONDLY, WE ARE CALLED TO LAMENTATION. YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A PARENT TO MOURN MISSED OPPORTUNITIES, BROKEN PROMISES, OR CRUSHED HOPES. ALL OF US—REGARDLESS OF OUR CIRCUMSTANCES—KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO FEEL REJECTED. WE KNOW WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE TO FAIL IN OUR BEST EFFORTS TO PROTECT, HELP, ADVISE, OR SAVE. WE KNOW THE GRIEF WE EXPERIENCE WHEN WE WATCH SOMEONE WE CARE ABOUT SELF-DESTRUCT BEFORE OUR EYES. ALL OF US WHO LIVE IN THIS BROKEN WORLD CARRY PAINFUL MEMORIES. WE KNOW WHAT IT IS TO LONG, AND FIND NO FULFILLMENT FOR THAT LONGING.

JESUS LONGS TOO. HE LONGS AND GRIEVES FOR HIS LOST AND WANDERING CHILDREN. FOR THE LITTLE ONES WHO WILL NOT COME HOME. FOR THE CITY THAT WILL NOT WELCOME ITS SAVIOR. JESUS MOURNS AS WHAT HE DESIRES FOR HIS CHILDREN IS REJECTED. HE CAN'T SAVE THE ONES HE WANTS TO SAVE.

BUT ABOVE ALL ELSE, DURING LENT, WE ARE CALLED TO RETURN TO JESUS. "YOU WERE NOT WILLING," JESUS TELLS HIS WANDERING CHILDREN. YOU WOULD NOT COME BACK. YOU WOULD NOT RELINQUISH YOUR RIGHT TO YOURSELF---EVEN IF YOUR LIFE DEPENDED ON IT. THE IMAGE OF CHICKS SNUGGLING UNDER A MOTHER HEN'S WINGS IS AN IMAGE OF GATHERING, OF INTENTIONAL ONENESS. BUT IT REQUIRES A RETURN. A SURRENDER. A TURNING AWAY FROM OUR LONE-RANGER WAY OF LIVING...OUR "I'VE GOT EVERYTHING UNDER CONTROL" WAY OF THINKING. WHAT IN US IS "NOT WILLING" TO BE GATHERED TO CHRIST? NOT WILLING TO SURRENDER? WHERE IN OUR LIVES HAVE WE CHOSEN, CONSCIOUSLY OR SUBCONSCIOUSLY, TO GO IT ALONE, REJECTING JESUS BECAUSE OF OUR PRIDE. GRANTED, WE NEVER COME RIGHT OUT AND SAY THIS BUT IT HAPPENS WHEN OUR LIVES ARE ON AUTO-PILOT AND WE ARE JUST GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS. IT HAPPENS WHEN WE HOLD GRUDGES AND RESENTMENTS, WITHHOLD FORGIVENESS, OR REFUSE TO ACCEPT FORGIVENESS FROM ANOTHER. IT'S IN OUR SUSPICIONS, CYNICISM, AND REJECTION OF OTHERS. IT HAPPENS WHEN FEAR OVERWHELMS US AND POWER, SECURITY, AND CONTROL BECOME OUR PRIMARY VALUES. IT'S THOSE TIMES WHEN WE SETTLE AND SAY, "THIS IS AS GOOD AS IT GETS, ALL THERE IS."

SOME OF YOU MAY PREFER ANOTHER IMAGE RATHER THAN A MOTHER HEN. PERHAPS A LION OR INFURIATED BEAR. AND YET A YEARNING MOTHER HEN IS THE MOTHER WE

BELONG TO. SHE'S THE ONE WEeping FOR US. SHE'S THE ONE CALLING US HOME. THE REACH OF HER WINGS IS WIDE. THE HOSPITALITY OF HER SHELTER IS VAST. HER BODY AND HEART ARE ON THE LINE, AND YET HER DESIRE IS FIXED ON US. ON EACH OF US. SHE WILL NEVER, EVER STOP CALLING US. JESUS NEVER GIVES UP ON US. JESUS WILL BE WAITING FOR US WHEN WE'RE READY AND WILLING TO SAY, "BLESSED IS THE ONE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD."

HOW OFTEN HAVE I DESIRED TO GATHER YOU, BUT YOU WERE NOT WILLING. DURING THIS WILDERNESS SEASON OF REPENTANCE AND TRANSFORMATION, MAY THE LONGING OF JESUS CALL YOU HOME TO HIM. THIS IS A CHANCE FOR LIFE, MORE LIFE, A NEW LIFE. ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE GATHERED IN THE SAFETY OF JESUS' PROTECTIVE SHELTER AND LOVE.