



“The Hen Wins”

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Today we have a fox and some chickens in the Gospel reading; and, if we had read a few more verses in our Old Testament reading, we would have read that Abram’s conversation with God included: a cow, a goat, a ram, a turtle dove, and a young pigeon. Plus, this is St. Patrick’s Day, so we cannot forget about the missing snakes of Ireland!

So, it is “kind of” logical that the first person I thought of when preparing today’s sermon, was my Cousin Becky. You see, when Becky was in middle school, her parents decided to uproot her and her little brother from my hometown in Wisconsin and move to Sammamish, which is outside of Seattle. To ease the angst of the move, they promised Becky a horse, but it turned out their new neighborhood was not zoned for horses; it was, however, zoned for chickens. Cousin Becky started collecting chickens and also second-hand (rescue) ferrets (ferrets inside, chickens outside, since ferrets enjoy eating eggs). Becky now owns her very own ranchette closer to Tacoma; where she has even more chickens, a few ferrets, the long-awaited horse and: a dog who likes to wear a chicken hat, a miniature pony who likes to ride in her truck like a dog, two alpacas, and -- at last count -- five goats. But no snakes.

By the way, it is just a myth that St. Patrick drove -- or charmed -- all the snakes out of Ireland. It turns out, snakes had died-out in Ireland by the conclusion of its last glacial age; some biographer just used that bit of blarney, to embellish Patrick’s story. As if being kidnapped -- or running away -- from England at age sixteen, being sold into slavery to work as a shepherd in Ireland for six years, having several adventures on his way home to England, and experiencing a vision that called him back to Ireland as a Christian missionary where he reportedly baptized thousands -- was not enough of a story!

Abram, later called Abraham, also had quite a story. But no snake (that was Moses). We heard a chapter of Abram's story today. He was at least seventy-five years old, perhaps as old as ninety-nine, and had no children with his wife (Sarai, later called Sarah). But God made a promise to Abram! God said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars... So shall your descendants be." Abram may not have realized it at the time, but that meant his family would be important as well as immense: the foundation of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim peoples. And what did Abram do? He simply believed what God told him, as he had earlier in his life, when God told him to take his kin (his wife, his orphaned nephew, his surviving brother, his brother's family and all their possessions) and move; in fact, move multiple times.

The words that follow God's promise (the promise that Abram would not only become a father but the father of as many descendants as there are stars in the sky) are breathtaking, especially from the Christian perspective. Let / me repeat those words:

"And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness."

Righteousness here does not mean "uppity-ness" (like the word is often used in secular culture today); rather, it means justification (justification by faith, not by works). God did not bless Abram with children because Abram had done what God said to do. Instead, God bestowed grace upon grace upon Abram simply because Abram believed in God's promise. We have that same opportunity to receive grace, simply by believing in God's promise today.

Switching from our father in faith to the parental figure in our Gospel reading, we know that Jesus uses ordinary images (a fig tree, the mustard seed, yeast, and so forth) to teach extraordinary things. This time he uses chickens a hen and her brood (not a brood of vipers, but baby chicks). In doing so, Jesus is using the same gender-bending imagery that was already used at least seven times earlier in the Bible (Deuteronomy and six different psalms) (Psalm 17, Psalm 37, Psalm 57, Psalm 61, Psalm 63, and Psalm 91): God as the mothering figure, the mama bird, and we humans as the baby birds.

And let me tell you, based on what I learned from Becky's chicken-raising resources, this imagery is often "spot on" when it comes to comparing humans and chicken-chicks. Just as God knows us and cares for us while we are still in our mother's womb, so too does the mother-hen take care of her pre-hatchlings. If one begins to emit a distress call from inside their egg (you know, maybe it's getting a little chilly in there), the mother-hen will vocalize and then shift her body within the nest until the pre-hatchling warms-up and begins to emit pleasure calls. You know, I was fascinated to learn that the chicks of some birds, including the pea-chicks -- the baby birds -- of peacocks and pea-hens that live in portions of Carrollwood, are pretty dumb right after

hatching. Chicken chicks – on the other hand – do not need to be shown how to preen themselves, scratch on the ground for food, or identify prize food (like a yummy grub). They do, however, rely on mother-hen for warmth and comfort, and (just like when they were inside the egg) they rely on vocalizations from mother-hen to reduce distress. There are at least three more parallels between the chick's relationship to mother-hen and our relationship with God:

First, happily, a mother-hen has no favorites. Any young chick will be welcomed if it runs to her. And if a stray chick loses sight of mother-hen and calls out in distress, then mother-hen (like our good Shepherd) seeks-out the lost one. The second parallel is that chicks prefer to be together, sharing the warmth and comfort of their mother-hen; in fact, each brood tends to have a few "leaders" (chicks who will seek-out a cold sibling, and lead them back to the warmth where they belong). The third parallel sadly, is that a lot of us act like the chicks when they start to mature; the timing may be different, but the result is similar. The initial instinct to respond to mother-hen (to come whenever she clucks) is lost at about eight days of age. And, although the chicks stay close to mother-hen for another four days or so, to sleep and warm themselves under her, they increasingly become distracted; distracted by the sights and sounds of their coop (and beyond). By the time the chicks are about eight weeks of age, they might not even acknowledge mother-hen anymore.

I think what we hear from Jesus, in today's reading, is the despair of a mother-hen: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! The "good news" is that despite our distractions – the mother-hen, our mothering-Christ, is still waiting and calling! The fox will not in the end, devour or scare this mother-hen away.

I will leave you with a question, this second Sunday in Lent: Are you willing to acknowledge our mother-hen? To repent and respond to God's comforting call? To take shelter in the shadow of her wings? And also to leave that shelter, to seek-out others, so that they too might find warmth – and God's grace?

Are you willing?