

The gospel-writer St. Luke
 enjoys pairs, typically reconciling pairs.
 The wayward, prodigal son and the loving father.
 The Good Samaritan and the man beaten on the road to Jericho.
 Mary and Elizabeth support one another through dual unexpected
 pregnancies
 and John and Zechariah complete a prophetic duty together.

These pairs, these sets of characters,
 all go together
 nicely.

But this week, Luke gives us a pair
 that does *not* play nicely together.
 Luke gives us the metaphor
 of the fox
 and the hen.
 That is the image St. Luke fixes in our minds today.
 It's perhaps easy to overlook—
 I had never noticed it in this passage until I was a field education student
 like Lucas—
 and my supervisor preached about it.¹

The fox and the hen.
 It's an image that conjures a sense of foreboding danger
 and an inevitable bloody conflict.
 It's also an image, my former pastor said,
 that reveals to us
 the character and strength of Christ,
 the character and strength of God,
 and, ultimately, our character and strength as Christians.

Let's make explicit what Jesus lets remain implicit.
 At the beginning of this episode,

¹ That supervisor was Rev. Amandus J. Derr at Saint Peter's Church in Manhattan, whose sermon from February 24, 2013 has been fixed in my mind and serves as the basis for this sermon. You can view Mandy's sermon here: <https://vimeo.com/60500012>.

some well-meaning colleagues come to Jesus
with a warning about Herod's deadly plot against him,
to which Jesus responds,

"Go and tell that fox for me . . ."

What a great line,

"Go and tell that fox for me."

Herod is, after all, a fox.

Top of the food chain,
a predator who eats, is never eaten.

Herod is the pinnacle of social stature and imperial power.

He is the ruling elite,
the guarantor of the status quo.

Or, as Jesus says here, Herod is a fox.

Now, what if

we were to pick an animal for Jesus, or for God.

We tend to, like to—

because our culture and society and time tend to and like to—

imagine God as powerful

and almighty.

We imagine God as a strong ox,

able to come in and—*whoosh!*—like plowing a field

plow over our enemies and the forces working against us.

We cling to an image of an all-powerful God,

who's in control,

who finds and enacts solutions to our problems

and who does it swiftly,

quickly,

easily,

like an eagle soaring high and then swooping down

from above.

But, in the only time that Jesus *ever* compares himself
to an animal,

Jesus says to the city Jerusalem,

"How often I have desired to gather your children together
as a hen gathers her brood

under her wings.”

Given all the options in the animal kingdom,
Jesus compares himself to a hen who gathers her chicks together
for protection, comfort, and shelter.

From time to time
Jesus does look like an ox
or an eagle:
when he’s taking on narrow-minded religious elders
with puzzling parables
or banishing entrenched demons
with a single touch.
But the more we look at Jesus,
the more the image of the hen makes sense:
how Christ shuttles around a brood of chick-disciples;
how Christ gathers *other* people together,
feeding them, healing them, sheltering them;
and how Christ proves, ultimately, to be so very vulnerable.

Yes, Jesus Christ,
the gospels,
and our faith
witness to a different kind of God,
a hen of a God,
who is the God of the Cross.
A vulnerable God
who gives away power and gives up status.
A compassionate God,
who stands in solidarity with the outcasts, the foreigners, society’s misfits.
An inclusive, sheltering God,
who brings a diverse brood of chicks
forever under her wings.

Herod as the fox.
Jesus as the hen.
We know where this story is going.
In Luke’s account,
it goes to the cross,

where a God as vulnerable as an unpenned, unfenced hen
is nailed with outstretched wings
and dies.

The fox and the hen.
It doesn't just serve as a metaphor for Herod and Jesus.
It also establishes the key dynamic between we Christians and our world
and how we are to live together in it.

Because even though Herod has long since died,
there are still plenty of foxes still around.
Our Lutheran tradition calls them forces that defy God.
Powers of this world that rebel against God.
Ways of sin that draw us from God.
These foxes are
systems that insist, "But it's always been this way";
injustice that excludes people because of race or sex
or how God made them to be;
the reality that people can still buy or earn their way to the top
and too bad for those who can't.
We know the foxes are around when disease takes its natural course,
when a plane falls from the sky,
when fifty people worshipping God are targeted and killed
for praying so.

Perhaps we chicks are used to the foxes and their destructive ways
by now.
No wonder we cling to a power-loving God of the ox or eagle.
Or no wonder some folks—maybe even some of us—have given up on God.
With so many foxes,
it becomes easier to believe in no God at all . . .
especially when the option
is a God
who's a hen.

Jesus is right when he says, "and you were not willing!"
It's true, Jesus, I want to say.
We love a God of Glory.

But the vulnerable God of the Cross?
 We're not so sure about that;
 that we who follow Jesus are meant to be as chicks
 who struggle and contend
 against the foxes.

Well-meaning people will come to warn us of the danger
 of taking on the foxes—

we are, after all, only chicks—
 and they are right to warn us.

For this is dangerous work,
 this struggle against false lies,
 this contention against that which opposes God's kingdom of grace.
 But this is exactly the struggle we saw Jesus undertake in the wilderness
 in last week's reading.

This is precisely the kind of contention that we undertake during Lent.
 And it is the kind of struggle and contention
 that marks Christian life.

Look no further than our Gathering Hymn for today
 to hear it summarized:

*Lead on, O King eternal,
 till sin's fierce war shall cease,
 and holiness shall whisper
 the sweet amen of peace.
 For not with swords' loud clashing
 or roll of stirring drums;
 with deeds of love and mercy
 the heavenly kingdom comes.*

With our deeds of love and mercy,
 because God's grace has made us strong,
 with the cross lifted over us,
 we do it.

We contend and struggle with the same foxes,
 and same forces,
 with which Jesus did and does too.
 We do it

because we know the end of the story.

The story of the fox and the hen
goes to the cross
and then continues to the empty tomb.

Jesus even reminds us of that today,
when he says,
“Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures
today and tomorrow,
and on the third day
I finish my work.”

On the third day.
The day of resurrection.
The day when all is reconciled and remade.
When there is no victory for the fox.
When there is a feast prepared, yes,
but chicken
is not on the menu.
Because
the day of resurrection
is a victory feast
of the Lamb.
Where everyone—
all us chicks—
feast together.

AMEN.