

Second Sunday in Lent ~Year C
Saint Paul's Episcopal Church
March 4, 2007

"As a Hen Gathers Her Brood . . . "

Lessons for the Day

- ✘ Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18
- ✘ Psalm 27
- ✘ Philippians 3:17-4:1
- ✘ Luke 13: 22-35

Homily

I greet you in the name of **God our Creator, Christ our Brother**, and the **Holy Spirit** who sustains us and sanctifies us, empowering us to love and to serve both God and Christ. (Pause)

Amen.

The **story is told of a young girl -- three or four years old --** hard at work in Sunday School one bright late-winter morning. Her round face was scrunched in concentration; her tiny hands gripped the fat crayons tightly. The teacher walked up and asked, "**Lucy, what are you drawing?**"

"I'm drawing a **picture of God**," Lucy said -- without even looking up.

"But Lucy," the teacher said, "**no one knows what God looks like.**"

"**Well, they will when I finish**," Lucy replied.

Think back to your earliest days in the church -- perhaps to Sunday School when you were a child, or to your first hearing of the creation narratives, when -- as the book of Genesis tells us --

"God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good . . . "

Genesis 1: 3b, 4a

Step back to your introduction to the faith and remember that moment: **What did you think God looked like?** If you had tried to draw a picture of God -- what would **you** have drawn? **What images of God do you carry?**

Remember: there is **no right answer here**. Even Moses -- high on Mount Sinai for the second rendition of the Ten Commandments -- had to hide in the cleft of a rock while God passed by. Even Moses -- were he here among us -- could only draw an accurate rendering of God's backside.

How do you image God? It is an important question -- not one to trifle with. Because **the shape of our God-understanding dictates the shape of our very life -- and our witness --** as we move about in the world. **We become like the God we love.** So . . .

If we understand God **only** as angry and vengeful, our God-understanding will issue forth into lives full of fear, anger, and revenge.

If we understand God **only** as gracious and merciful, our God-understanding can yield lives prone to spiritual laziness -- forgiving our own sins in a way that minimizes what it is to come face-to-face with holiness of the living God.

My early God-image was an old man with a gray beard in a flowing robe -- not unlike Don and Fred. I have since broadened my God-image (sorry, guys!) and one of the things that has helped me is passages like today's Gospel.

Some of you have **probably heard today's lesson from Luke preached in the past --** especially the part about the narrow gate and householder behind the shut door. It's an easy text to preach -- and to misinterpret, as well.

Today, however, **I'd like to focus on the end of our Gospel Lesson --** especially the next-to-last verse. Hear again the word of God from the Gospel of Luke:

". . . How often have I desired to **gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings**, and you were not willing."

Luke 13:34b (NRSV)

So: Jesus desires to gather us around him as a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings!

The people of first-century Palestine knew much more about hens and chicks than we do -- likely someone in Jesus' audience had chickens in their own backyard. For those of us who don't have chickens, however, **this passage can evoke a bucolic, pastoral setting that is winsome but incomplete.**

Baby chicks are fuzzy and busy and noisy and cute. **Mother hens are not to be trifled-with.** Did you know that breeders sometimes have to separate two hens -- both raising a clutch of chicks? The **hens can become so aggressive in defending their own chicks that they kill each other.**

Brood **hens can also be amazingly maternal** -- some breeds turn the eggs they incubate five times a day, always seeking to provide an even warmth for the growing chick inside. Brood hens also **focus intently on the task at hand** -- they will not eat until their chicks are provided-for.

Brood hens are **warm and sheltering -- gathering the chicks under their wings for a warming session** sufficient to sustain the chicks before they head out to forage for food.

And now Luke tells us that **Jesus desires to gather us as a hen gathers her brood** under her wings! What a **wonderful image this is -- warm and nurturing and maternal.** It's a useful counterweight to another God-understanding that many of us carry:

*"Immortal, invisible, God only wise.
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes . . . "*

"Immortal, Invisible, God only Wise", Walter Chalmers Smith, 1824 - 1908

(Remember that neither of these God-images is sufficient unto itself -- we worship a both/and God in an either-or world. Still, the consolation of this image of Christ as a mother hen is hard to overstate.)

Jesus presents us here with a God who is fully accessible -- hovering over us even -- and sheltering us under wings of love. In fact, Jesus' words here echo an image that appears over and over in the Psalms. And the only thing that prevents us from resting under those wings of love is our own unwillingness to be loved!

God -- in the person of Jesus Christ -- comes to us offering us a love beyond measure. Like the mother hen providing food for her chicks, God in Christ has provided all we need for a full and abundant life.

To extend the metaphor of the mother hen, the **hen provides the food, but the chick has to eat it** for himself. The hen cannot accept the food on the chick's behalf. The chick has to make its own choice and choose life.

As so it is with this fierce love -- these sheltering wings, this eternal life -- that Christ offers us. Christ can offer; we have to accept. This puts me in mind of a reflection William Barclay made while commenting on this passage from Luke:

". . . nothing hurts so much as to go to someone and offer love and have that offer spurned. It is life's bitterest tragedy to give one's heart to someone only to have it broken. [That is what happened to Jesus in Jerusalem; and still (Christ) comes to (humankind), and still (humanity) rejects (Christ).]

Daily Study Bible Series, "Luke", page 186, William Barclay

So how do we respond? Christ has come to us and offered love -- perfect love, a love we would never dare hope or imagine. **If it is our job to choose love, to choose life, what might that look like?** Just this:

1. **We must (I must, you must, we all must) say "yes" to the fierce, mothering love of Christ.** We must **come in from the cold** of resolute self-reliance. We must **gather under the warmth** of his wings. We must **eat the food he has provided.**
2. **We must respond to Christ's love with a fierce love of our own:** loving those God puts before us, and telling them of Christ's deep and boundless love for all of humankind.

Our response to Christ's love can take many forms -- and certainly the Saint Paul's community offers a broad cross-section of ways to love others on God's behalf:

- We can **join the group from Saint Paul's headed to Costa Rica** in August -- a trip for which John Shields and others are doing the advance work even as we speak.
- We can **volunteer for the Augustine Project or Kid's Cafe** and help young people develop their reading and study skills so that they can succeed in school and in life.
- We can **work with the Summer Enrichment Program.**
- We can **donate to -- or build -- or both the Habitat House** that Saint Paul's will begin within the month.
- We can **volunteer with Mike Bradshaw in Saint Paul's Place** -- strengthening and staffing the mission-outreach ministries of the Saint Paul's.

And -- above and beyond all this -- we can all **live a winsome and attractive life. A life that bears the marks of our emphatic "yes" to the nurturing love of Jesus Christ** -- the Christ who desired "**to gather his children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings . . .** "

Jesus loves you as a mother hen loves her chicks -- with a fierce love, with a love that would (and did!) die to protect you and to save you. **Say "yes" to that love with you heart, and then give witness to that yes with your hands.**

Amen.