

## FOX AND HEN

Luke 13:31-35

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A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson  
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA  
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

What do you know about foxes and hens? I see foxes every once in while running across the road, like small red terrier dogs with long tails. They're beautiful animals. But farmers don't like foxes because they eat chickens. Farmers build better and more secure pens for their animals to keep out foxes. But those sly old foxes seem to be able get into the best a farmer can build. They can jump over, dig under, and go through, all kinds of obstacles. If a farmer's barn happens to be in their home range, chickens often become part of their daily diet.

There's a children's game called fox and chickens. Someone gets to be the Fox. The others are Chickens. The Chickens have a barn. The Fox can't go in the barn, so the Chickens are safe as long as they stay in the barn. The Chickens ask the Fox what time it is. The Fox says a number. Then the Chickens come out of the barn as many steps as the number the Fox says. When the Fox says "midnight", the chicken runs back to the barn, because that's when the Fox can catch them. When the fox catches a Chicken, the Chicken changes to a Fox and help the Fox catches more Chickens. The game ends when all the Chickens are turned to foxes.

~~A similar game was played in the past.~~  
Jesus once talked about fox and chickens. King Herod was playing his own version of the game of fox and chickens only he was playing for keeps. Some Pharisees came to warn Jesus that Herod was planning to kill him. Herod was the king of the Jews whom John the Baptist had earlier criticized for immorality. In response, Herod jailed John and later beheaded him. Despite Herod's track record of murder and violence, Jesus didn't seem unduly concerned about the warning the Pharisees gave him. He told the Pharisees, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work'" – meaning that "I'm not ready to die just yet, and until my time comes Herod, even though he is a bloodthirsty king, has no authority over me." Herod was a hungry fox looking for a meal.

If Herod was a fox, Jesus likened himself to a mother hen. Jesus looked at the city of Jerusalem before him. I imagine Jesus was walking towards Jerusalem. Jerusalem is on top of Mount Zion and must have presented a beautiful site; the walls and towers and turrets, and colorful banners fluttering in the breeze. Jesus

loved this city and more deeply he loved the people who lived there. He must have foreseen the destruction of the city. Just thirty six years later, in AD 70, Roman armies put down a Jewish rebellion in Jerusalem. They leveled the city walls and destroyed the magnificent temple. Jesus foresaw Jerusalem's impending doom and grieved for them. He wanted to protect them. He stretched out his arms to the city and cried out, "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, and you were not willing!" Notice how he likened himself to a mother hen. Herod is a fox. Jesus is a hen and the people of Jerusalem are little chicks.

*But a mother hen does not inspire much confidence or security*

The Bible likens Jesus to many things. For example, sometimes Jesus is called the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Now, if I'm a little chick and a fox is out to get me, I'd prefer to have the Lion of the tribe of Judah protecting me. A lion will make short work of a fox. But the image of Jesus as a mother hen doesn't really inspire a lot of confidence.

Think of other images Jesus might have drawn upon to express his protection of us. He might have referred to himself as the divine fox hunter. Picture Jesus sitting up there on a horse with his fox-hunting gear. He has a pack of dogs who know how to corner and kill a fox. He has a gun to kill the fox. I prefer to think of God as a fox hunter – heavily armed - who goes out and kills the foxes who attack and kill his chicks.

Or think of God as an eagle. An eagle, like a hen, is a bird - but an eagle has a lot more going for it. An eagle is one of the largest and most powerful birds. An eagle has sharp, powerful talons and beak. One of Aesop's fable is about a fox and an eagle. When the fox left its kits, the eagle swooped down and killed the foxes babies. I sometimes like to think of God as an eagle who swoops down, attacks and kills all his and our enemies before they have the opportunity to injure and kill us.

But a hen. You'd think Jesus could have thought of something better than a hen. A rooster would give me a little more confidence, but not a hen. In some ways it's a comforting image – huddled under the wings of a mother hen close to her warm body. A mother hen is fine in the terms of comfort but it doesn't offer much in terms of protection (Barbara Brown Taylor). But Jesus likened himself to a mother hen whose chief purpose in

life is to protect her young, with nothing much in the way of a beak and nothing at all in the way of talons.

About all she can do is fluff herself up and sit on her chicks. She can also put herself between them and the fox.

At the very least, she can hope that she satisfies his appetite so that he leaves her babies alone (Taylor).

In so many ways the Herods of this world have a powerful advantage over Jesus. Jesus has disciples; Herod has soldiers. Jesus serves; Herod rules. Jesus prays for his enemies; Herod kills his. Herod is a fox.

Jesus is a mother hen. In a contest between a fox and a chicken, whom would you bet on (Taylor)?

Well, I bet on Christ. I bet on the Mother Hen against the fox. I know that sounds crazy. But remember what happened in the end. When Herod finally came after the Mother Hen, the Hen put herself between Herod and her chicks. The mother hen stretched out her wings on the cross and everyone who flees to her will be saved in the end. There's an old Gospel hymn:

*Under His wings I am safely abiding,  
Though the night deepens and tempests are wild;  
Still I can trust Him – I know He will keep me,  
He has redeemed me and I am His child.  
Under His wings, under His wings, Who from His love can sever?  
Under His wings my soul shall abide, Safely abide forever.*

I bet my life on the Hen, rather than the fox. I'm betting that the Hen will win in the end. I bet my life on Christ. I realize a lot of people say the fox has already won and will win in the end. People say that the weapons the fox used are the most powerful weapons – the weapons of violence and hate and death. But I believe the Hen won and is going to win in the end. The Hen was killed. But three days later the Hen was back. She died a mother hen, and afterwards she came back with teeth marks on her body to make sure we got the point: that the power of the foxes of this world can't kill the love of the divine Mother Hen for us, nor can they steal us away from Her. *Before me, under her wings... watch her... you can't see the fault but... chicks...* We, and our loved ones, might have to go through what that divine Mother Hen went through in order to get past the foxes, but She's waiting for us on the other side, with love stronger than death.

Let us pray: Be merciful to us, O God, be merciful, for we have taken refuge in you; in the shadow of your wings will we take refuge until this time of trouble has gone by. Amen.