

Second Sunday of Lent
March 17, 2019
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Don't Be A Chicken

"Don't be a chicken." A taunt you hear on schoolyards. Bullies say it—maybe to a runt, or someone who looks scared, or to the vulnerable person everyone picks on. "Don't be a chicken." Bak bak bak bak bak. Or something like that.

So we bring the barnyard to church today with image of a mother hen. Even though we reject those God sends to us. Even though we kill the prophets and silence their message. Even though we prey on the weakest ones, Jesus desires to spread his wings over us like a mother hen over her chicks.

It's a comforting image. And we can imagine God spreading her wings over those who died and those grieving the horrendous losses in New Zealand. Murder in a mosque, a holy place. We can imagine God spreading her wings over all those who died and those grieving the losses from the air crash in Ethiopia earlier this week. We can imagine God spreading her wings over mothers grieving on this city's Southside, over parents grieving children addicted to drugs or facing suicidal thoughts.

If being a chicken means being vulnerable, we can relate. Who doesn't feel vulnerable amid the threats of these days: the threat of global climate change, the threat of terrorism stirred up by hate and racial bias? Who doesn't feel vulnerable to what can happen to our own bodies and minds due to aging and illness?

I don't think we can say much about God without metaphors. They say something true—but not literally. Jesus is a shepherd. Jesus is living water. Jesus is the bread of life. God is a strong rock. God is a sheltering tree. God is a radiant dawn.

God as a chicken? "Don't be a chicken" is still in my head. Mother hens . . . they're too, well, vulnerable. A rooster would be more appealing to us. At least they can defend themselves. The rooster has the beak and the spiked feet!

My parents grew up on a farm and I called them for sermon research. Particularly when a city boy is given agrarian texts. And this week, a barnyard animal. My mom said how mean and grouchy a "cluck hen" can be when you go near her nest.

I asked my parents if Jesus as a Mother Hen seemed like a good image to them. They thought so. Hens protect their brood. They will do anything to keep away predators. But that's the thing. Chickens and chicks get killed. By foxes. And coyotes. And thanks to the Internet, I learned raccoons, weasels, snakes, even dogs and cats. Poor chickens. Poor chicks. They seem so vulnerable.

We've got a fox in the gospel also. Herod who is after Jesus to kill him. Yet there are always foxes preying on vulnerable ones. The foxes of this world are the ones with power. They are sly and cunning. They use biting words and threaten military might. They make fun of the weak. Under their breath, they threaten: "don't be a chicken." Yet underneath their bully exterior is usually great insecurity and inferiority. So who's the real chicken?

If we were a mission congregation looking for a name, I'd try to convince you to name this church "Mother Hen Lutheran Church." And I love the Filipino hymn we're going to sing in a few minutes. I read that chickens outnumber people in the Philippines. Maybe that's why they are drawn to the image of God as a hen sheltering her brood.

Being vulnerable is something we all feel at some time or another. When life is overwhelming. When we wonder whether we can bear another loss. When we come up against the mighty and powerful. When over and over we watch the defenseless get trampled. Foxes are dangerous. Life is dangerous.

Brene Brown is the author and speaker who helps people today see vulnerability as strength. When someone asked her if revealing imperfections was a sign of weakness, Brene answered, "the difficult thing is that vulnerability is the

first thing I look for in you and the last thing I'm willing to show you. In you, it's courage and daring. In me, it's weakness . . . yet we're hungry for people who have the courage to say 'I need help' or 'I own that mistake' or 'I'm not willing to define my success by my title or income any longer.'"

Abraham showed vulnerability when he lamented that he was childless. What would his future hold without an heir? Instead of God telling him: "don't be a chicken, buck up," God said, "look at the stars and see them as hope and promise."

But wait. Do we want a vulnerable Mother Hen God? One who defends her young but eventually is killed? Is that where Lent is leading us?

As one writer (Debie Thomas) puts it, "Maybe what we need most this Lent is not a fox-like divinity who wields his power with sly intelligence and sharp teeth, but 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 her children's terror, and offers refuge *there*. There at ground zero, where the feathers fly and the blood is shed."

You can also see how Mother Church is an apt description as well. Through our work for justice we embody Jesus' mission to the most vulnerable. The church as a big fluffed up hen, offering shelter and warmth to all kinds of chicks, including orphans, runts, and a few unsuspecting ducks as well! (Barbara Brown Taylor). "Don't be a chicken." Hmm. Not so sure about that.

So maybe that's why we use a posture of openness and vulnerability as we pray—the orans position during the Lord's Prayer. Think of it as a reminder that vulnerability is strength. And that we have a vulnerable God, you might say, who suffers with us, shares our lament, shares our tears, shares our lot in life.

And Jesus as a Mother Hen. I'll take it today. A Mothering God spreading her wings over us. A Mothering God feeding us with her very own life. A Mothering God sheltering her brood. A Mothering God embracing us through whatever risks and dangers are still ahead.