

**SHELTERING WINGS:** 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent Sermon by Dan Stern, Broadview Church, 3/4/07  
Luke 13:31-34 (*like a mother hen*); Psalm 27

Let's face it: frankly, Jesus is more down-to-earth than most of us are. For example: Jesus suggested that the then current ruler was a particular kind of animal – one we don't often see in the city – and assumed those closest to him knew what that woodsy, countrified insult implied. He also assumed his disciples got his talk about baby chicks and mother hens. It's not that you and I know nothing about chickens. I for one like them. They're cool. But right now, I live a long way from them. And when I try to imagine protective, sheltering wings surrounding me, I don't picture chickens! Guardian angels, maybe. Not chickens. I maintain a file of field and stream, fox and hen stories in a metal cabinet down in the basement, but that's about it. The lessons of the barnyard and of my rural background seem a bit distant to me now.

But not to worry. Today's gospel focus is not all that much about barnyard animals anyways. And I've probably mis-titled my sermon, because it's only indirectly about sheltering wings. First and foremost, it's about having the courage of our convictions, and even when not being sheltered all that well, staying true to our calling. Secondly, it's about our Lenten challenge to appropriately live with wants and with longings. Thirdly and only lastly is it about getting the shelter, protection and love that we need through it all.

1) It's about courage.

I don't know if it was courage or folly that prompted Jesus to call King Herod 'that fox'. I don't know how much weight that particular insult carried in those days, but clearly it was not a complement, and in general, calling one's political ruler 'that fox' is not the best way to procure long life. Mary our church newsletter, *Steeple News* editor, was given permission by *The Nation* magazine editors this week to republish part of one of their editorials recommending careful discernment in picking our nation's next president. I not-so-courageously omitted the parts about the current chief executive being a liar and a despot. And yet in the Bible the persons behind the reigning principalities and powers of darkness are specifically named and repeatedly lambasted. If the emperor has no clothes on, somebody should say so, for goodness sake! But that takes something most people don't tend to have a lot of these days. That takes courage. It's always been dangerous to speak truth to power. It was for the prophets of old. It was for Jesus. It is for us.

Ideally we'd like to be both sheltering and courageous at the same time. Not so many years ago, after a gay student named Matthew Shepherd was beaten, tied to a fence, and left to die in Laramie, Wyoming, at his funeral, some other not-so-nice people planned to hold up signs expressing yet more vicious condemnation of the deceased. So Matthew's friends stood in a silent circle around the hate mongers, donned with huge angel wings. Those angel wings, with their mute message of blessing, blocked those signs of condemnation. These were courageous sheltering winged ones.

Mother hens use their wings both to shelter and to valiantly try to defend their offspring from predators. It can get dangerous being a chicken: you're pretty vulnerable; there are foxes out there – coyotes and rattlesnakes. Baby chickens are especially unfocused in their curiosity, easily

distracted. Yet a mother hen can't keep her offspring under wing for long. It's the same with all loving protective parents. The time comes when a child can no longer be kept under wing. Jesus knew this too. He knew of the suffering that would be ahead for him and for his followers. And in effect, he says to each and to all: don't be chicken, don't be easily deterred from your Godly calling. Stay true: begin your journey with the end in mind, but let go of worry about that end, and be brave. Or as Charlotte Russell succinctly sums up the way to learn to do courage: Show up. Listen. Tell truth as you see it from your heart. Let go of the outcome.

First and foremost, today's gospel focus is about having courage, about staying true to our calling.

Secondly, it's about appropriately living with wants and longings. The Lenten Season is a particularly poignant time of wanting and of longing. We're sojourning, remember, in the wilderness now with Jesus, learning how to fast and pray, learning how less is more, learning how not to have everything all the time making us gluttonous and slothful. We need, in other words to sometimes linger leanly in uncomfortable territory, to just experience our wants and longings a while. Today's reading from Luke, in fact, speaks of a long list of longings, a whole swirl of wants. We may ponder, for example, what the Pharisees want when they warn Jesus about Herod. Herod, they say, wants to kill Jesus. Jesus wants to continue on his way, healing people, casting out demons, until his time arrives to face the worst that the world can dish out – and, in a way, he wants to face that too – not because he likes suffering or wants to die, but because he wants to show us how to live. Jesus wants to show us both how to live well and how to die well, which in both instances, turns out to be in a way that is amazingly lacking in fear. He also wants to gather all the people of Jerusalem, all the city's powerful and oppressed, together as a hen gathers her brood. Which is to say, he'd rather protect us all if he could. But then there's the complicating factor that most of us baby chicks don't want to be so gathered.

Are you beginning to see how the word 'want' can be utilized as a lens through which to view the entire Gospel? God wants to gather God's people. God's people want little or no part of it. God wants to win our want back. (Willimon) We have many and sundry wants. "Civilization", said Mark Twain, "Is a limitless multiplication of unnecessary necessities." Christianity at it's bravest and strongest and best, on the other hand, is a matter of rewiring our wants; and about deciding well what we want most of all.

Today's gospel focus is first and foremost about courage, and secondly, about living with longings in our hearts. Thirdly and lastly, it is about receiving enough of the caring, protective love we each need all the way through.

Like the creator of Psalm 27, each one of us longs for that 'quiet, secure place in a noisy world, that perfect getaway, far from the buzz of traffic'. I believe Jesus longed for that protective, sheltering time and place too. He would have preferred, I think, like all of us, a long life, a comfortable life. He doesn't really speak of his pending death as desirable, but rather, as necessary. The words he speaks in today's passage are these: My work, I must, it is impossible for a prophet not to go there. And when he compares himself to a mother hen, he's not only utilizing one of the strongest feminine images we have of Christ, he's also identifying himself with a long line of Jewish prophets who came before him, prophets who themselves, in staying

true to their perpetually unpopular yet most holy of callings, were not eager, but willing to face suffering and death if necessary for the sake of their 'brood'. Prophets ever since, and in our own era have done the same: Gandhi, King, Oscar Romero. We too must continually make choices between expediency and righteous confrontation. When we choose to confront, to face evil and danger and even the possibility of suffering or death, it's not that we want these things. We don't want to deprive ourselves of anything. But when we know we have to, we also know that Jesus showed us we can.

Sometimes wings need to flap pretty assertively here on earth to counteract the hate, to tell the truth early and strong enough. But my hope gets renewed whenever one more person gets spiritually and politically motivated enough to help change come about for the good. My hope gets renewed when one more public official starts to put money where mouth is and really does something to end war, to provide adequate education and healthcare, to promote equal rights and access for all. Of course a lot of mother-hen squawking and wing flapping will yet have to occur. Jesus said he longed to shelter us like a mother hen shelters her chicks. We don't always go for that, our hearts are restless, our wants are many, our distractions plentiful. But amazingly, this world's still spinning and God's still taking care of us. So until all we chicks find warm and welcoming comfort under mother-hen Jesus' broad wingspan, let us take heart and be brave. Amen.