

GENESIS 15:1-12, 17-18
PSALM 27
PHILIPPIANS 3:17-4:1
LUKE 13:31-35

Second Sunday in Lent
March 13, 2022; Year C

Chicken Theology!

Ruffles have ridges! “Foxes have holes!” Jesus seemed to have a fascination or fixation on those cute, furry animals, as sly as they might be. He even describes one of his major nemeses as a fox, Herod the foxy but clearly paranoid and stupid oligarch, oligarch being the operative word in vogue these days! It seems that it is hard to have a conversation about chickens without bringing up the subject of foxes, knowing how those four-legged hunters and scavengers love to get in the henhouse and enjoy what some of us steeple types from the South affectionately call the Gospel Bird. As Forest Gump once said, “They go together like peas and carrots,” at least until one of them eats the other one in what is never a fair fight! I would say like Russia and Ukraine, but oh my what a fight the Ukrainians are waging! But I am sure you did get my David and Goliath analogy! What is a fine Sunday dinner without some fried chicken, something I must sadly report is sorely lacking in this neck of the Northwoods? This could have been a deal-breaker! And while I am at it, what is it with this broasted chicken thing?¹ Now, I googled the word “broasted” to see this great sight, and much to my surprise, evidently “broasted” is not even a real word. Underlined in red, the ubiquitous color indicating absolute, abject, failure, “broasted” came up as “breasted” as my first option on spell-checker! Sounds dirty, but it’s not! That point alone indicates that indeed broasted is a made-up word. “Roasted,” came up as my third choice! I forget what came in second! Sounds like an

¹Since preaching this sermon, one of our church members has informed the Church Office that “Broasted” is a trademark traditionally used by local supper clubs, requiring specific equipment! I greatly appreciate the information!

awful thing to do to a chicken! Broasted!!! But I digress; I often do! Yes, whether it be baked or fried or grilled or yes, even broasted, anything but boiled—yikes, what a horrible smell that creates—the chicken is a versatile fowl, a multifaceted cooking bird, so many ways to prepare. As an eatery in my hometown of Atlanta declares, “Chicken is chicken, but the wing is the thing!” And don’t forget the gizzards, hearts, and livers! Yum! I have often said that if I landed on a deserted island for any length of time, it would not be beef, my immediate go to favorite, but chicken, if I only had one choice for the duration because it can be prepared in so many delicious and creative ways. And on that note, off we go on another homiletical journey, exploring the parameters and ramifications of Jesus as a self-described, a self-proclaimed chicken! Chicken pride! Go figure!

Yes, in today’s Witness from the Gospels in Luke, Jesus laments the painful fact that the people closest to him, his people, fellow Israelites, fellow Jews, fellow citizens of Jerusalem, all seemed to have spurned his affectionate overtures, summarily abandoning ship, deserting the Rabbi, outright rejecting him and his loving ways, dismissing his gracious, merciful, and peaceful persona. Perhaps his devotional shtick had worn thin, his message becoming way too routine or mainstream, blasé, ever so stale, now falling on deaf ears, just another ho hum prophet in a long line of prophets. Perhaps there was frustration that there seemed to be no teeth in what was interpreted as a very soft message, no movement toward aggression, no reactivity resulting from what had now clearly evolved into what was fully understood as an embracing, endearing, worldview, as Jesus confronted the world domination of Rome’s occupational Empire with lovingly hopeful images, his preaching and teaching characterized by, immersed in overtures of peace and social prosperity for all. The rank and file wanted action, believing Jesus was going to be a revolutionary leading a peasant revolt, molded in the warrior zealotry image like his wild cousin John, the zealot! Had they been duped,

fooled? No, they just misunderstood, accidentally or intentionally, perhaps hearing only what they wanted to hear! They had had enough and wanted war, a just war, a rebellion, an overthrow of government, ransacking Paul's now infamous "powers and principalities" now represented in this Roman juggernaut. They wanted their land back, their nation, their way of life, liberty, and happiness. They wanted to follow their historic covenantal rules and regulations, living according to the great tradition of the Law, the sacred Torah being their only guide for living. Nothing hurts more than to be rejected, to "feel" rejected. Oh, the remorse, the regrets! Oh, what might have been! And yet, there he was, this humble carpenter-turned-Rabbi from Nazareth feeling all alone, the world, his world, suddenly against him, or so it seemed, feelings of being disconnected from the people he loved most playing tricks on his troubled mind! Momma said there would be days like this! Momma said! Jesus' words are almost dripping with melancholic sadness, having a certain wistful resignation about them. Anytime anything begins with "If only. . .", we know it is not going to be kicks and giggles. In the case of Jesus, the handwriting and handwringing was on the wall and we know the temporary outcome will not be good, the immediate and assumed final solution not satisfactory in the least.

Ironically, it was the Pharisees of all people who had come to Jesus and warned him of Herod's demonic plans, this puppet ruler no doubt hatching an evil plot, the group as a whole telling Jesus plainly, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you!" In this short verse we get a glimpse into the strange and strained interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees, a relationship that always seemed to be marked by a love/hate "feel" about it, a certain codependency, an on again and off again way of relating to one another. At the depth of their being, the Pharisees knew that there was something special about Jesus, even believing that he had been directly sent from God, Nicodemus being

the best example of their affection. Incarnate? Messiah? Christ? Lord? Savior? Son of God? Etcetera! Even so, Jesus proved to be a counter-cultural figure, refusing the clergy club in the overtures, perhaps promises, indeed hellbent as he set out to upset their proverbial apple cart, and like the Blues brothers, Jake and Elwood, were on a mission from and of God, intent on turning their world upside down, as he sought to reform the faithful tradition of his forebears, a reformation that would take away their status, remove from their clutches their public and private power, prestige, and privilege, reducing them to the likes of everybody else, leveling the religious and societal playing field. All things considered, after weighing their options, the fickle Pharisees turned out to be the ones who just could not get on board, determining that Jesus had gotten in the way, was meddling where he did not belong as a common Rabbi, this itinerant preacher now an impediment, an adversary who needed to go. Now do remember this, as we approach Holy Week and the Passion narrative, despite any intents on the Pharisees' part, they really could do nothing, were powerless, to have Jesus removed, forcefully by death or subtly otherwise, because they did not have that kind of authority. Civically speaking, they were powerless, not powerful! Rome certainly would not have afforded them the luxury of wielding that kind of persuasive influence. Period! So no, despite what the biblical narrative says, the facts of history tells me so, strongly indicating otherwise, the odds heavily suggesting that the Pharisees did not collude with the Romans to have Jesus executed as a common criminal, guilty of a seditious treason, summarily dispatched the way the Bible story somewhat conveniently and purposefully suggests, almost telling me so! As is often the case when reading any part of the biblical narrative, the details are usually to be found somewhere between the lines! The biblical version of events just did not convey the way the Roman Empire operated, the way the system worked, as they carried out their occupational duties. Anyway, Jesus dismissed the Pharisees' warning, dismissing Herod in the process, calling him a fox, whether or not that was a complimentary name, then

telling them, for whatever it was worth, that he was busy, back to business as usual until he was not! And that conversation sets the stage for Jesus' sad lamentation, a true tale of woe! Plot twist!

So, with all that background dancing like sugar plums in our heads, because background is always essential, always matters, is always of ultimate importance in deciphering all things biblical, we can, yes finally, we can now turn our attention to the heart of the matter and what matters and the matter of Jesus interesting, most intriguing, description of himself as a "mother hen," yes, a chicken! A chicken! Yes, that would be a hen, a foreshadowing of a beautiful and oft lacking feminine image describing the Divine, not a rooster, not the proud masculine gamecock figure! Surely by now we have all had enough male images of God! To best understand this warm and fuzzy, womblike metaphor of "fowl" proportions, pardon the pun, they come so easily to me, we must first talk about the nature of chickens. In order to do chicken theology, we must first look at chicken biology! Suddenly, I want to hum a few bars from "Old MacDonald!" Yes, "with a cluck, cluck here, a cluck, cluck there, here a cluck, there a cluck," and so on! By and large a mother hen is a docile animal, passive in so many respects, breeding and inbreeding having created the perfect domesticated barnyard bird, dinner ready. But give a hen a chance for her eggs to hatch and for her to raise some chicks and instinct takes over, the survival of the brood now job one, trumping any domesticated influences that normally hold sway. Suddenly, she is a beast with which to be reckoned, fighting until the death to protect her chicks, to save them at all costs. And yes, that includes any encounter with a fox, sly or otherwise, this invasive interloper who would dare enter the henhouse and steal one of her prized offspring. David and Goliath! Russia and Ukraine! Putin and Zelensky! Jesus and Herod! A hen and a fox! And while the hen puts up a valiant effort, a brave, most courageous, even if psychotically suicidal fight, we know how the story inevitably ends, we know the outcome! Or do we?

Against all odds and the gates of hell, personified in Roman domination, Jesus stood in the gap, filling a void in which love was sorely lacking in this civic Empire, Jesus facing an enemy armed to the teeth, staring down an adversary that, on first or second glance, could never be beaten by the likes of Jesus nor an army of his Jewish contemporaries. And yet, like a mother hen in a bad mood, he longed to gather his brood under his inclusive, all encompassing, wings. It is a most hospitable image. And as we all know full well, Jesus' brood included everyone, even his sworn enemies. And that chicken just won't fly! It never has as a domesticate fowl! The late John Shelby Spong once spoke about the need to "love wastefully" as a core component of the Christian life, as a major plank in following Jesus. I have always found great value in Spong's thoughtfully wise words. But today's text got me thinking beyond or at least outside my theological patron saint's musings, to consider what it means to "love vulnerably." Jesus' only weapon, his only shield for protection, was love! I am trying to imagine what it would be like to put oneself in harm's way in reaching out the proverbial olive branch. What would it be like to try and build relational bridges, especially juxtaposed against those who are in the process of seeking to tear them down while destroying the one desperately seeking to build fragile bridges of hope? What would it be like to try and broker not only a détente based on tolerance, but real, lasting peaceful relationships based on acceptance and affirmation? It is the naïve kind of peaceable kingdom advocated in the prophecy of Isaiah in which lamb and lion lie down together, child and adder play together harmoniously. It is the kind of a place where Russia and Ukraine value and respect one another, coexisting as neighboring national partners, honoring one another's boundaries and sovereignty, the only beating, the only beatdown, reducing swords into plowshares. And yes, I am speaking more to the foibles of Russia's folly than its free and independent next-door neighbor. This earthly and eternal utopia is a place of mythic proportions that no longer mirrors or fatalistically fulfills the dooming

Psalmist's shadow looming over a valley of darkness and death, full of evil, but a place of light and life, where the best of our humanity, our common humanity, comes out to play and is always on display. Yes, a Camelot, nirvana, where arrow and spear and sword, and all our modern inventions of war, become rod and staff, reduced to and enlarged as a harmless shepherd's crook.

According to the Gospel writers, Jesus' fate had already long been sealed in what was a very short, the briefest mission and ministry on history's radar blip. He knew they were out to get him, that they were coming for him. As someone once said, just because you are paranoid does not mean they are not out to get you! Jesus knew he had pushed all the wrong Roman buttons and would now pay the ultimate price for insulting Caesar, comfortably sitting on his throne, daring to deny this despot's divinity, Jesus paying dearly with his life. And yet, even now in those sober moments, he still sought to love and protect his own, the most vulnerably compromised, those who by legal default were living on the fringes in their everyday lives, disenfranchised as an occupied people, long invaded by the invaders, a marginalized nation living under the thumb of a brutal occupational dictator. Oh, how familiar and disgusting it all sounds today as history nauseatingly repeats itself as if we were in a societal, global, spin cycle. Where will it stop? Where will it end? We turn the wheel and continue to come up snake eyes, as empty as the bankrupt human shells who seek power and dominion at all costs, including the mythical collateral damage in the slaughter of the innocents, genocide in real time. Oh, the human cost, the toll on humanity—emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually—oh, the atrocity of it all! And yet Jesus would not be denied or deterred until, until Rome's powerful principality finally drove some nails in a cross, thinking they had put the proverbial nail in the coffin, closing this horrific chapter in their sordid history. And the faint echo we continue to hear and have heard down through the ages is that at some appointed time in our lives we too are called to take up our cross or

crosses and bear it or them, a cross or crosses specifically and uniquely our own, crystalized in a certain moment in time, yes, we hope while amazingly, miraculously, galvanizing our spirits, steeling our resolve, even strangely feeding our souls. Yes, here Jesus was, naked before his own people, transparent, vulnerable, fully exposed in every way imaginable, still just wanting to reach out and give a giant hug to everybody, and especially a people, his own people, who had chosen to refuse and reflect it, spurning all his deepest affections.

It is interesting, that right before Jesus uses the beautiful analogy of a mother hen, yes, a chicken, a most endearing allegory, he specifically calls Herod a fox. Now I have no doubt that Jesus had a lot and much more creative and colorful language to describe his turncoat nemesis, a bootlicking, brownnosing, Jewish pawn wearing a much-too-comfortable Roman uniform, drinking his own toxic Kool Aid. Jesus' imaging of a fox comes right before his metaphorical imaging of himself as a mother hen, a precursor, a harbinger revealing his weakest, most, compromised vulnerability, all the dread and death to come. This was Jesus' wink, wink, nod, nod way of describing his dilemma and the destiny that would be fulfilled come hell or high water, yes, even confronting the cruelest of ways as he stood for all he stood for in that bellwether moment in time. In the end, the fox grabs its prey and shakes it wildly, strangling the very life out of it, a horrific display of blood and gore and guts, the victim literally in the cross-hairs, and then enjoys the spoils of a fine and well-deserved chicken dinner, NOT, with the victim a mere vessel, nothing more than a temporarily satisfying snack, a tasty morsel on life's journey. Supper is served! But for a moment, just for a moment, time seeming to stand still, the moment in time seeming to last for an eternity, everybody taking notice. Yes, everyone sees what is taking place, privy to what is at stake, never to forget, like turning on a light switch in a very dark, pitch black, room, metaphor of darkness intended. It is for these reasons that we can now read this story, his story, Jesus'

story, along with many other amazing stories, epic tales about the Rabbi from Nazareth of all places. And Herod? Herod, just like every power-hungry despot throughout the world's history, the Herods of the world are reduced to the dustbin of history, nothing more than a bit actor in a huge drama, a damnable and curiously annoying footnote. Putin, are you listening? After the conflagration the world is witnessing between the senseless aggressor Russia led by its despotic moron Vladimir Putin—Putin's War—against the wiles of a worthy and talented foe in the proud Ukrainian people and their brave, their most courageous comic-turned-president in Volodymyr Zelensky, history will be more than kind. Generations will forever tell the tale of his and his people's glorious exploits, win or lose, applauding and lauding their herculean efforts while disparaging the idiot Putin, rating and ranking him right up there with none other than his unacknowledged hero and alter ego Adolph Hitler, the stool standard for wannabe despots, fascists, and tyrants everywhere.

Yes, I believe the gospel, as revealed in these four Gospels, each version its own unique but synthetic testimony, calls us to a love, a perfect love, a kind of love that at its deepest level is always beyond ourselves without God, beyond the best of our human capacity, an impossible perfection to attain, for it is a love that is born only of the Spirit, a love that only comes from a mother "henning" God! Only if humanity is ever able to capture the essence of that graciously loving vision on a worldwide, a global, scale, will we ever be able to overcome ourselves and the worst of our selfish, our narcissistic personalities, individually and collectively, and become a part of what Jesus in Luke's feasting Gospel describes as the Great Banquet Feast. Yes, it is a gathering table where all are welcomed, accepted and affirmed, Jesus' magnificent vision of the realm of God on earth, envisioned by a very hospitable man from Nazareth who did indeed do all he could do then and continues to do now, to fulfill a most profoundly loving legacy, full of grace and truth, mercy and peace.

The only survival of the human being, this human race, and the survival of this planet is to find that calming space, a peace reflecting a loving will and determination, yes, to be “wastefully loving,” but to also be “vulnerably loving,” love always on full display, revealing the best of our humanity. Folks, this is “chicken theology,” and it is a word for the ages, an eternal word that we dare not avoid, ignore, or disdain, dismiss, or disregard. We cannot afford such flippancy! We cannot take that chance! As followers of Jesus’ way, we cannot take this call lightly! We dare trivialize at our own peril! And with all that having been said, now, I guess is the time to go have lunch. And I am not sure, after this sermon, whether chicken is on your menu, your dietary desire for the day! But my guess is that perhaps you will never look at a chicken the same way again, especially before you just might decide to choose to order takeout wings or some other parts and take that first big bite out of the Gospel Bird! And somehow, I never did answer the question for the ages, “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?” And we may never really know why the chicken crosses the road! Perhaps it depends on whether it is a hen or a rooster that is awaiting with open wings on the other side! I guess, however, like so many things, these are also mysteries wrapped in much enigma and we will just have to keep on guessing! Yes, I thought we needed to end this sermon with just a little fowl humor! **Chicken theology! Thanks be to God!**

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and wants to gather all the world together the way a hen gathers her chicks, creating a most harmonious and vulnerably loving brood! Amen and amen!

