

St James United Church



Message for March 16, 2025

Second Sunday of Lent

“Hens in a Fox World” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Genesis 15:1-2, 17-18; Luke 13:31-35; Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* (opening paragraphs of Book I)

No wonder we prayed that our steps are shaky at the start of the service. Jesus had barely started on his journey to Jerusalem and his life was threatened! Following him just got real. It's a reminder of how threatening he was, how counter-cultural he was, and how we are to be as well.

And yet that's easier said than done. Our culture is constantly shaping us, its assumptions, values, patterns so taken for granted we often end up more loyal to our culture and its values than the way of Jesus. Augustine points this out when he posits that we live in two cities at the same time, the earthly city in which is also present the city of God. We will never create the city of God on our own because even at the best of times both as individuals and as the church, we are pulled by sin as well as by grace. Paul wrote to this in Romans, how he often did what he didn't want to do and struggled to do what he knew he should. We often think he is referring to temptation but I hear as well internalized cultural norms pushing against the values of the gospel. This pull of the earthly city can be so strong, we mistake cultural patterns for God's way. That happened when missionaries came to the Americas and imposed European norms on Indigenous peoples. In our time we hear some Christians make ethical assertions that seem opposite to Jesus' teaching, making negative claims about migrants, deriding empathy, encouraging cutting social supports. There's a video called "GOP Jesus" that pokes fun at this by recasting Jesus' sayings. For example, quoting Matthew 25, faux Jesus says, "when I was hungry you gave me something to eat, ...and behold now, I am all me lazy and entitled. You shouldn't have done that." At the end of a number of recast sayings, an actual verse is shown, Mark 7:9, which reads "You have a clever way of rejecting God's law to uphold your teaching." That highlights just how influential culture is over gospel.

It's a form of what's called *eisegesis*, how we read our assumptions into a text instead of seeking the original meaning. I do it too, though often projecting a more left-leaning view. To be honest, it's almost impossible not to do it to some degree. We need to be willing to suspend our beliefs as we ask what is being said, then compare our interpretation to the overarching narrative of the bible. I find that today's gospel portion captures the contrast. Jesus challenges Herod, calls him a fox, code for being destructive, predatory, pursuing power at others' expense. It's not what leaders are supposed to do, they're to protect them, like a hen for her chicks. That's God's persistent call through the prophets for us to tend to the needs of the most vulnerable in our society. As Jesus describes himself as a hen, he reminds us that God is a mother, always wanting what is best for her children, even at the cost of her life. As we look across the whole of

the bible we see a pull in this direction, not just in who God is but how we are to be. So when we look at a text, though it's unlikely we'll ever fully grasp the writer's intent, we err in favour of the protective hen, rather than the predatory fox.

And yet as I said, culture's pull is strong, and Western culture is much more foxian than henish, so much so we'll even use a scriptural warrant to assert what is really a culturally-shaped view. An example is the passage from Genesis as God promises Abram that his descendants will inherit the land. I struggle with it given the perpetual conflict in Palestine-Israel, the text used by some as proof that Jews have exclusive right over the so-called "Promised Land", even though Palestinians live there, even as various Canaanite peoples lived there as Abram arrived, still lived there when his family went into Egypt, and according to the biblical text still did when they returned. How then might we bring a bit more hen than fox to our interpretation, especially as the biblical claim seems to break God's persistent command to protect the most vulnerable?

First, I need to put the reading in a wider context, especially by considering other biblical texts and whether they push against a particular interpretation. One such text is Exodus 22: foreigners in the land are to be treated like the children of Israel. This passage upholds what archaeologists have found in their research, that the people who became the nations of Israel and Judah didn't come from away, certainly not en masse from Egypt, but settled the plain out of the hill country around Jerusalem in a time after Canaanite culture had mostly collapsed, although some people still lived there, meaning that the land was never exclusively for one group. It was always shared. This leads me to consider non-Western perspectives on land, remembering we have not always viewed it as something we can own. Perhaps Abram held a more Indigenous view, heard God's promise not as possession but an invitation to be in relationship with the land, as other peoples were as well. Finally, I need to recall that the story was passed down orally and later written to respond to a particular need at the time, which was a need for national unity after the tragedy of sixty years in exile in Babylon. I feel empathy for their writing it as they did, empathy too for those who saw in it the promise of a home as they endured pogroms in Europe, helped them keep going after the horror of the Shoah. In those times it was a hen story, about protection, resilience. Is it still that, or does it affirm being a fox? And if that's the case, shouldn't we affirm different texts, like Exodus 22, and so protect the vulnerable? We know who that is in this circumstance.

We fall into these foxian rather than henish views because as Augustine wrote, our hearts are restless until we rest in God, until we finally give our hearts to God's way, and so can draw on God's mothering love. Ironically, that's the main point of the story about Abram, the promise made by God because Abram trusted in their relationship. This too is a main point in the gospel, Jesus trusting in God and the work he was called to as Herod threatened him. That is all any of us can do, trust God, trust too that the pull of grace is stronger than sin, the pull of God's way of protective love is stronger than the pull of culture, and then to do our best. We won't always get it right. But when we realize that we have faltered, we start again, seeking always to give our hearts to God, and so to follow Jesus on a path that errs on the side of caring for the vulnerable, that chooses to love. Amen.

