

# *The Wings of God*

By  
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from the pulpit of  
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Luke 13:31-35

<sup>31</sup>At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” <sup>32</sup>He said to them, “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. <sup>33</sup>Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ <sup>34</sup>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! <sup>35</sup>See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

In the spring of 2018, I was invited to participate with our neighbor Rabbi David Strauss in a trip to Israel and Palestine created intentionally for pairs of neighboring clergy, Jewish and Christian, from around the United States to study and travel to the Middle East together to be in intentional and potentially transformational conversations around the complicated and fraught dynamics in the region.

What made the trip particularly interesting was that, as diverse as our group was—a mixed tour of Christians and Jews—the diversity within the Christian clergy—along the spectrum from evangelical to progressive—and within the Jewish clergy—from Orthodox to Reconstructionist—meant that there were often more disagreements within our own traditions than across our interfaith boundaries.

We spent over a week traveling, visiting religious leaders, holy and historic sites, ancient and modern, meeting with government officials, non-profits, journalists, political scientists and business leaders, young people, artists and poets. We led each other in prayers every morning and evening, reflected on the stories of our traditions, and expressed our frustrations with one another and the communities we assumed the other was advocating for. We grieved over the pain experienced on both sides and argued about whose suffering was more unholy.

But we also laughed and shared long meals and many bottles of wine. Each one of us learned something new and came to understand some part of these complicated issues in a new way. Looking back now, I am glad I had that experience when I did. I am not sure that today, we would find even the small amount of hope we experienced six years ago.

The trip began in Tel Aviv and traveled throughout the country for days, especially in Galilee, so we had gotten to know each other fairly well by the time we stopped on our way into Jerusalem at an overlook with the whole expanse of the city in front of us. After taking about 100 pictures, we read together our text for this morning from the Gospel of Luke - what we refer to as Jesus' Lament Over Jerusalem. More than almost any other moment from

that trip, I think about those fifteen minutes standing on that overlook and listening to the frustrated words of Jesus of Nazareth.

One biblical scholar, in reflecting on this passage, draws attention to Jesus' repetition of the city's name: Jerusalem, Jerusalem - freighted with affection and mixed with disappointment. - the city who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.

I think about that moment so often because as much as we, and almost all of the people we met, found a way to imagine peace together in the end, there was still too much history, too much harm, too much mistrust, too much despair to overcome. Here we were, young and old, men and women, conservative and liberal, Christians and Jews who all valued life and peace, and we found no way forward. What I actually took away most clearly from that trip was an expanded capacity to articulate my lament over the entire region.

I think back on that moment at that overlook because it gives me a small measure of comfort to know that Jesus, too, saw no other path in his ministry that didn't lead him directly to this fraught city with a complicated past, unable to figure out how to protect these complicated people.

Unlike in the Gospel of John, in the synoptic Gospels such as Luke, Jesus doesn't enter the city of Jerusalem until Holy Week, so this story is compelling because it takes place in the north. It foreshadows Jesus' ultimate destiny miles away in Jerusalem, marking a kind of halfway point in his itinerant ministry of teaching, healing, and performing exorcisms throughout Galilee.

A group of Pharisees have come to warn him that Herod - the ruler of Galilee - was out to kill him, just as he killed John the Baptist. Jesus is hardly phased and refers to Herod as a fox - not implying any of the things that we expect foxes to be known for - cleverness and ingenuity - but rather merely as a second-tier predator, shadowed by his Roman overlords.

Jesus knows he will not die at Herod's command, so he pivots to an animal we might consider the polar opposite of the deadly fox: a protective mother hen.

Even as he thinks ahead to his own death, he laments the hard truth that despite all of the shelter, the care, the salvation that he is able to offer to his people, that despite the broadness of his embrace, the expansiveness of his wings, there will still be those who are unwilling to accept his protection from the brokenness of the world. Like a mother who will give anything to protect her brood, Jesus knows that in the end, he will have to give them his whole self.

Groundbreaking feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson writes in her book on theology and biodiversity - *Ask the Beasts* - of the significance of the bird and her wings throughout religious history and especially biblical theology.

“One animal more than any other has been used to symbolize the effective presence of the spirit in the world, namely the bird. To ancient people, these denizens of the skies seemed closer to the heavenly dwelling place of God, and their freedom of riding the wind and coming to rest on earth came to represent the streaming of divine power to land-bound humans.

The Hebrew Scriptures present a constellation of imagery of the bird and her wings. Whether hovering like a nesting bird over the egg of primordial chaos at the creation; or sheltering those in difficulty under the protective shadow of her wings; or bearing the enslaved up on her great wings toward freedom, the approach of God's creative and recreative Spirit is evoked with allusion to the bird and by association to the broad tradition of divine female power.”<sup>1</sup>

Swiss biblical scholar Francois Bovon also points out that the wings of a bird were not just symbols for the presence, power, and protection of God but also a way that the Jewish people described the Temple, of course, located in the center of Jerusalem.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson - *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, 2014.

You can hear this confidence and love for the safety of the Temple in the words of the Psalmist this morning

One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after:  
to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,  
to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.

Bovon writes this, “Applied to the protector God, wings can refer to the temple, a place serving both as a sanctuary and a locus of divine presence. As a feminine and maternal image, adapted to first biblical wisdom and then to the Christ, wings offer protection to beings already born, who therefore enjoy a certain degree of autonomy. Their autonomy is so real that they have preferred to turn down the offer. In Luke’s eyes, that was absurd and unnatural. This was a tragic opposition of two wills, even though everything was possible in a holy city which was a residence for God and the people, a meeting place for heaven and earth, a center of the world.”<sup>2</sup>

The other nuance to remember when we consider all of the ways that the image of this mother bird with her expansive wings was evocative of the protection of God’s presence and the protection of God’s temple is that the Gospel writer is writing for an audience in the late first century that has just experienced the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Romans and that is the first generation of believers whose faith is based on a Jesus they have never met, whose arms have never been wrapped around them.

Later in his reflections on this story, Bovon lays out the inevitable consequences of both of these realities:

“Here, Jesus condemns the stubbornness of his people: Jerusalem will be abandoned to its fate, and the temple will see God’s presence disappear. The protective wings will no longer be those of the temple but of Christ. For God would henceforth be found elsewhere than in a sanctuary made with human

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<sup>2</sup> Francois Bovon, *Luke 2*, Fortress Press, 2013.

hands: God will be there in the person of Christ and in the life of the Christians and the church.”

It is important to note as we spend this summer exploring the different animals that populate our biblical texts that, while scripture and our western theological and liturgical traditions again and again imagine Jesus as a vulnerable lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, when Jesus himself has the opportunity to compare himself to an animal, it is only this mother bird with her expansive wings that he names - not an image of vulnerability but one of strength, resilience, protection and compassion.

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I was in college when I first encountered work of German artist Käthe Kollwitz, whose body of work returns again and again to the strength, resilience, protection and compassion of mothers. Born in 1867, her work spans various media, including etchings, woodcuts, and sculptures, characterized by stark realism and emotional depth. Kollwitz's personal experiences, including the loss of her son Peter in World War I, heavily influenced her artistic expression, infusing it with a poignant sense of grief and empathy.

The two pieces of hers that were most impactful to me when I experienced them for the first time at the National Gallery of Art in DC explore the same concept. The Mothers is a woodcut print that depicts what feels like a huddle of mothers with their arms tightly wrapped around one another, protecting a group of children whose faces peek out from in between their skirts. The other is a sculpture entitled The Tower of Mothers. It is almost the same scene, but in this version, the mothers are turning outwards, facing the world with their arms outstretched, linked around each other, protecting the children in the center. Years away from being a mother, I could still feel in her art the primal instinct of a mother to protect her children from the pain of the world.

Her depictions of mothers and their children were not always so dramatic. In lithograph after lithograph, she created images of joyful mothers and children wrapped in each other's embrace. She was so prolific in creating these

charming images of mother and child that we have one here in our own art collection as a church.

The image on the cover of our bulletin today, entitled Seed Corn Must Not be Ground, referring to the very moment when a community uses up its last available resource for building a future, is considered to be one of her last images of a mother protecting her children. It was created in the middle of WW2 in response to the call of young men to serve as anti-aircraft auxiliaries for the Third Reich. She described her motivation around this piece with these words:

“This is my last will and testament: Seed corn must not be ground. My heart has been very heavy these days, so I drew once more the same picture: boys, real Berlin youngsters, straining to go like young horses scenting the morning air, are held back by a woman. The woman (an old woman) is standing over the boys, holding them inside her cloak. She spreads her arms and hands around them in a violent and commanding gesture. Seed corn must not be ground. This is fundamental - like “war, never again! Not a fervent wish but a commandment, indeed a demand.”<sup>3</sup>

Her words capture the same passion and grief that we hear from Jesus the Mother Bird - a voice freighted with affection and frustration all at once - an inability to prevent the inevitable harm to her children, but also a demand that the world has the potential to be different.

So what do we do with this image of Jesus as the mother bird, as so many of us are frustrated and struggling to understand the brokenness of the world around us today? If we are called to be Jesus’ hands and feet on this earth, does that mean that there is a role for us, a calling to us to also be his wings?

In her reflections on the connection between the Mother Hen and the Mother Church, Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor imagines just what that could look like:

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<sup>3</sup> Werner Timm. Kathe Kollwitz. The World of Art. 1980.

“The Church of Christ,” she writes, “as a big fluffed up brooding hen, offering warmth and shelter to all kinds of chicks, including orphans, and runts and maybe even a couple of ducks. The Church of Christ planting herself between the foxes of the world and the fragile boned chicks. Who would have thought that being a mother hen offered such opportunities for courage? Maybe that is why the church is called “Mother Church.” It is where we come to be fed and sheltered, but it is also where we come to stand firm with those who need the same things from us. It is where we grow from chicks to chickens, by giving what we have received, by teaching what we have learned, and by loving the way we ourselves have been loved - by a mother hen who would give his life to gather us under his wings.”<sup>4</sup>

As a congregation—as a community—even in the midst of our diversity and even our polarization as a culture these days—old and young, men and women, liberal and conservative—we all come here to find shelter under the protection and care of Jesus Christ.

So, too, should we expect to be offered the protection and care of each other as Christ’s church. Despite disagreements or difficult- really difficult - conversations, we are always working to gather each other under the shelter of our community. That is the work to which we have been called, it is how we reflect the compassionate love of God to one another and to the world, it is how we live our individual and collective lives as creatures made in the image of this mother bird.

Our laments echo Christ's, and our frustrations echo those of our God. But along with that holy inheritance, we also claim the broadness of our wings as a true expression of the love and mercy of the one who protects us all.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*. Cowley Publications, 1997.