Mother Hen
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
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SCRIPTURE READING Psalm 27; Luke 13:31-35
Lesley

Psalm 27 (Inclusive Bible)

God, you are my light, my salvation— whom will I fear?

You are the fortress of my life— of whom will I be afraid? 2 When my enemies attack me, spreading vicious lies about me wherever they go, they, my adversaries and foes, will stumble and fall. 3 Though an army mounts a siege against me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, I'll still be confident. 4 One thing I ask of you, God, one thing I seek: that I may dwell in your house all the days of my life, to gaze on your beauty and to meditate in your Temple. 5 You will keep me safe in your shelter when trouble arises, you will hide me under the cover of your Tabernacle— you'll set me on a rock, high and out of reach. 6 Then I'll be able to hold my head up, even with my enemies surrounding me.

I will offer in your Tabernacle sacrifices of great joy— I'll sing and make music to you, God.

7 Hear me when I call, God! Have mercy on me and answer me! 8 You say to my heart, "Seek my face," and so it is your face I seek! 9 Don't hide your face from me; don't turn your faithful one away in anger. Don't reject me, don't desert me, O God of my salvation, for

you are my only help. 10 Even if my own parents reject me, you, God, will accept me. 11 Teach me your way, God, and lead me on a straight path because of my enemies. 12 Don't surrender me to the will of my enemies; for defamers rise up against me breathing violence. 13 Even so I have confidence that I'll see the goodness of God in the land of the living! 14 Wait for God—stand tall and let your heart take courage! Yes, wait for God!

Luke 13:31-35

31 At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." **32** 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. **33** 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.' **34** 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! **35** 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.' "

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I am afraid of birds.

True story, I am terrified of heights, and I am afraid of birds.

There's a story here, a childhood trauma from which I have mostly recovered. I was perhaps five or six years old - just old enough to be outside alone, or perhaps not old enough to be outside alone - and I was playing in the back yard in late spring when the robins were tending to their nests. The baby birds had emerged from their eggs and dried their wings and stretched out their legs and eaten many nutritious worms courtesy of their parents and grown their feathers. And they were beginning, trying hard, to fly.

A tiny bird landed on the ground near me with a thump and laid there stunned. I did not think for a second, I just ran to the little one to pick it up and help it back to its nest.

This was a bad idea.

The mother robin, you see, was nearby watching. And robins do not like humans touching their young. This perhaps is a shared trait of robins and human parents: don't mess with our babies.

Mama robin flew down directly toward me and decided that she would peck me until I let go of her baby. Which I did, but not before I had a dozen bleeding spots on my scalp.

So, I am afraid of birds. To this day if I see a bird flying toward me, I cover my head and cower in fear.

Perhaps, though, I've been able to move a bit away from phobia. I think they're beautiful and I enjoy looking for rare species when I'm out hiking. Though I will never be truly comfortable with crows or

hawks or even sparrows, I suppose I have moved toward awe and respect. English translators of the Hebrew Bible have translated the same word from Hebrew, *yira*, as fear, respect and awe. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, Psalm 111:10. Though I am afraid of birds, when I see a hawk flying over the pond, I can also witness its magnificence.

And knowing just how protective mother birds get, I am even more in awe of their empathy. "...an ability that was once thought to be uniquely human. 'A new study has uncovered, for the first time, that mother hens are such attentive, caring parents that they 'feel' their chicks' pain. In experiments, female chickens showed clear signs of anxiety when their young were in distress. [They] found that adult female birds possess at least one of the essential underpinning attributes of empathy – the ability to be affected by, and share, the emotional state of another.'"[1]

Having said all this, I also read our gospel passage slightly differently than the average Christian. Because I know that a mother bird is not just tender and sweet. A mother bird is fierce and protective. Do not get in a mother bird's way.

Jesus, the mother hen, calls Herod a fox and Jesus the mother hen will not back down from the fox's threat to her beloved children.

To continue our animal theme, this is Mama Bear Jesus who will not let anyone interfere with her young.

[1] https://www.patheos.com/blogs/ecopreacher/2017/05/jesus-mother-hen/

Yet this text is also the mother hen calling out her young.

“How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

Toward her children, a good mother is not *only* gentle and sweet. Sometimes a good mother is challenging. Sometimes a good mother weeps when her children do not remember who they are, a good mother weeps when her children act out. So we see Jesus here, fiercely protective, and us held in that protection. We see Jesus being courageous, and Jesus as our own model.

As I pondered - was both in awe of and a little afraid of - Jesus the mother hen, I thought this week of fierce bravery, loving protection, courageous witness against the today’s foxes.

I want to tell you about a conversation I had this week with Adam Smedberg of Church World Service. He’s CWS’ lead New England staffer. And he’s neither Jesus nor a mother hen but he and other Church World Service staff are following that direction. Following the Way of Jesus, if you work in disaster relief, refugee resettlement, and all the other things CWS does, following in the way of Jesus right now requires fierce bravery, loving protection and courageous witness.

Adam told me on the phone:

That half of Church World Service's US staff were furloughed for 60 days, thru March 31. Most of the folks working in refugee resettlement, helping newly arrived people.

All of their African resettlement staff of 700 have been furloughed.

The annual budget has plummeted from 269 million dollars to 60 million due to cuts in USAID and refugee resettlement programs.

But he also said this: someone will have to drag me away from my office.

Adam's work is not done, CWS' work is not done, so today and tomorrow they will keep serving in every way possible.

And then in an email late this week, he wrote:

"Church World Service has been impacted by recent Executive Orders and the cuts to USAID. The Executive Orders have impacted the communities we have been working with on our Resettlement programs. When the Orders were signed we were providing support to 4,200 refugees. When refugees arrive here in the US we work with them for their first 60 - 90 days. There was also an additional 22,000 refugees who were declared, "ready for travel" since the Executive Orders were signed have [been] stranded in the countries they were prepared to leave. These are folks who had sold their homes, apartments, vehicles, and personal possessions they were not planning to bring here. They currently do not have rebooked travel at this time.

Church World Service has also a history of partnering with USAID with our global humanitarian projects. Recently we learned of two communities who we are being requested to increase our assistance because of USAID withdrawals:

- USAID hospitals have been closed and staff recalled in Thailand and they were providing support to Burmese refugees. Now CWS is feeling the impact of trying to meet the medical needs as well as food, shelter, education etc.
- With USAID no longer doing peace keeping work in DRC, the M23 rebels have taken over more territory and are in control of Kivu. Now, we are seeing massive influx of Congolese refugees from Kivu and surrounding areas showing up in our bordering camps in Uganda and Tanzania. We are pushing to serve these communities with limited resources.

These were just two examples of the work of today and tomorrow.

Church World Service is the lead author of an Ash Wednesday Ecumenical Declaration Defending Refuge. The UCC among dozens of other groups signed on.

“Together in faith and rooted in love, we resolve to continue in the centuries-old practice of Christian communities walking alongside refugees and immigrants in their pursuit of safety and dignity. We pledge to restore and promote hospitality and welcome to those seeking refuge - regardless of where they are from, how they pray or what language they speak.”[2]

[2] https://cwsconnect.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/B_March4-Ecumenical-Declaration.pdf

They ask churches to commit to advocacy, to telling the stories of refugees and immigrants, and to continue to provide resources and support to refugees and immigrants. In other words, the Ash Wednesday declaration asks us all to be mother hens. It is a powerful document, and I've printed some copies in the narthex. It's also linked in the manuscript of this sermon.

Web version: https://cwsconnect.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/B_March4-Ecumenical-Declaration.pdf

This is the place where the mother hen is both loving - doing everything they can to take care of the most vulnerable - and protective and courageous - advocating on their behalf.

We know that there is work to be done, today, tomorrow, and the third day. Even when foxes are nearby and forces outside our control change the landscape, we have neighbors to love and protect, today and tomorrow and on the third day.

But the good news is this: the mother hen is with us. God is our refuge and our strength. God will gather us in to the shelter of her love. And this gives us the strength to be mother hens, too. Amen.