

**February 28, 2010**

**Beth Robey Hyde**

**Luke 13:31-35**

### **A Mother's Lament**

This is a scary text. It is one we preachers sometimes try to avoid, or to look at as only an indication of things coming to a head in terms of Jesus' ministry and life; as a step towards his death; and we don't want to think about that very much. But recently I read so many powerful commentaries on this text that it has moved from one I avoid to one I hold most close to my heart. I give thanks to those commentators, whether I mention them by name or not, whose thoughts make up so much of my new understanding as you will hear in this sermon.

Jerusalem. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the holy city. The City of David. The city where every Jew knew the presence of God resided in the temple and the glory of God dwelt over the city. The holiest place on earth. The place where Jesus was dedicated as an infant and where he astounded the teachers when he was twelve. The place where he, like thousands of others, sought to be at Passover, the holiest of religious observances?

Only now Jerusalem was occupied by Rome, and its leaders, its religious leaders, were succumbing to the lure of power and glitter and all that the Roman empire offered. Herod, whom Jesus called a fox, was a puppet king, ruler under Rome of Galilee, where Jesus lived and worked, and uneasy colleague of Pilate, governor of the district where Jerusalem lay. By the way, calling Herod a "fox" was an insult. Herod thought of himself as nothing less than a lion, but Jesus saw him as a fox in the henhouse.

Like the ancient prophets, Jesus spoke a word of warning to the city and to its inhabitants. Like Jeremiah and Isaiah before him, Jesus warned that because of the unfaithfulness of the people, God's presence had left the temple, and the city

(c) 2010. Rev. Beth Robey Hyde.

would become desolate. These words actually came true some forty years later, and the writer of the gospel of Luke traced that destruction to the death of Jesus.

But Jesus' words were so much more than words of warning. They were words of lament, of heart wrenching grief over the actions of his people, the collaborations with worldly power and greed that spelled a death wish for Jerusalem. As stated in another place in scripture, Jesus said, "If only you knew or claimed the things that make for peace." This was the city that refused the aching love extended to them by God, and that would ultimately reject Jesus.

So Jesus headed resolutely on, on into personal danger and on to the place where the future of his people hung in the balance; where the ongoing conflict between God's values of justice, inclusion and compassion and the world's values of comfort, power and greed was coming to a decisive battle. As one theologian wrote, "He was going to take on the authorities, whether represented by Herod or the finicky spirit of Jerusalem, by moving toward the conflict rather than away. He's the mother hen who will pursue her child through thick and thin, through good school days and bad, through stupid moves and violent outbursts; he's the mother hen who folds the covers down on the bed and puffs up the pillow, at the same time saying, 'don't ever let me catch you doing that again.'"

But all that that mother hen saw was chicks scurrying in the opposite direction. Jesus' words make us realize that he included even those who threatened him: the power players in Jerusalem. What they see as power he calls foxy maneuvering, and yet he also sees them as chicks lost in a storm, afraid and stubborn.

Which brings us to us today. Another writer wonders what would happen if our Lenten disciplines included laments on behalf of the unjust? What might a lament

look like for terrorists? For those who deny resources to the poor and who oppress those who have no advocate? What if we were to lament our own silence and collusion with international crimes of poverty, hunger and disease? As we weep over the destruction in Haiti, how many of us are even aware that the extreme poverty in that nation is the direct result of 140 years of United States foreign policy that feared the power of a nation of former slaves so close to our borders and helped to suck the results of their labor out of the mouths of their people and place it in the hands of former slave owners?

What if we truly opened our hearts and our minds and lamented the loss of those children in our own nation who are mired in the morass of failing schools, as well as to those who seek to teach faithfully in such places and even to those who think that there are better places to put our tax dollars than into those schools?

The Herods of this world always find allies among people of faith. Remember the good Christians who owned slaves and justified that practice with the Bible? What about good Christians who make decisions about national security, decisions that would make Jesus weep? And what about the destructive ways we treat the environment? That alone would make a series of sermons.

Lent is the time to take seriously the ways we live that are signs of death rather than life. At the end of Black History month, we can recall those in our own lifetimes who have moved resolutely into the conflict rather than away toward their own safety: not only Martin Luther King, but also hundreds of freedom riders who risked their lives to stand with the marginalized and to confront the ways of death.

I cannot end this sermon without quoting rather extensively from a sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor ("Chicken and Foxes") that touched my heart so deeply.

(c) 2010. Rev. Beth Robey Hyde.

She reminds us that we are the body of Christ together, not individually as we each seek our own spiritual well-being, but as we act together.

Then here's what she said.

"At the risk of his own life, Jesus has brought the precious Kingdom of God within reach of the beloved city of God, but the city of God is not interested. Jerusalem has better things to do than to hide under the shelter of this mother hen's wings." She then describes the meager resources of a mother hen attempting to protect her brood against a vicious and well armed predator with "nothing much in the way of a beak and nothing at all in the way of talons. At the very least, she can hope that she satisfies his appetite so tht he leaves her babies alone."

Taylor then moves on to the resurrection: "after the cosmic battle of all time, in which the power of tooth and fang was put up against the power of a mother's love for her chicks, having loved her own who were in the world, she loved them to the end. She died a mother hen, and afterwards she came back to them with teeth marks on her body to make sure they got the point that the power of foxes could not kill her love for them, nor could it steal them away from her. They might have to go through what she went through to get past the foxes, but she would be waiting for them on the other side, with love stronger than death."

In the battle for life, "God bet the farm on the hen."

The Christian church has often been called "mother church". As a mother hen, the church is calling all the marginalized and vulnerable, all the hungry as well as the angry and the ones who would run the other way, to take shelter under her wings, to learn the things that make for peace and for life. What does it mean to us here today, a small group of chicks sheltered under the church's wings, that indeed, God bet the farm on the hen?

(c) 2010. Rev. Beth Robey Hyde.