

“Beneath the Wings of a Brooding Hen”

(a sermon based on Matthew 23:37-24:2, page 26 in the New Testament, NRSV pew Bible)

by

*Rev. Dr. Paul A. Lance, Pastor
Seaside Community Church (United Church of Christ)
22940 Ocean Avenue, Torrance, California 90505*

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A “brooding” hen. It’s a peculiar image for God, don’t you think?

To “brood” (according to my Webster’s Dictionary) is to “*sit on or incubate eggs; to produce by hatching; or to cover young with the wings.*” So, Jesus meant precisely that when he referred to *himself* as one who desired to gather Jerusalem’s children together “*as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.*” The offspring of an animal that are hatched and cared for all at one time by one parent, or any group having a common nature and origin, may be called a “brood” -- and that Old English word derives from the Saxon (German) term “*Brueder*” (translated “*brother*”). We are all sisters & *brueders* in one brood. (I said that just to get a chuckle from our German seminarian Christian Brost.)

Seriously, a “brooder” is *one that broods...* or, in farming circles, the *brooder* is that *lightly heated structure* used for raising young *fowl*. It’s the incubator and hot-house nursery for baby *chicks & ducks & geese*. A brooder.

All that is well and good, if we were *chicken farmers*. But we’re a *church*, for goodness sake, stuck in an *urban* environment... with pet cats and dogs, and iguana and hamsters -- not *pet chickens* or ducks! What *relevance* does a “brooding hen” have to do with *our* lives, our families, our problems? *Rev. Lance, get a clue!* Don’t talk word pictures: God as a mother hen, *indeed!*

Well, there is a secondary meaning to the word “brood” -- brooding -- and maybe that’s the *uncomfortable undercurrent* within my sermon title.

According to Merriam-Webster’s *New Collegiate Dictionary*, if the verb “brood” is not used *of a bird* (to incubate, hatch, and cover with one’s wing), it is a verb that means “to think anxiously or gloomily about” (to *ponder*), or “to sit quietly and thoughtfully” (to *meditate*), or “to dwell gloomily on a subject” (to *worry*), or “to be in a state of depression.” So, to “*brood*” among us *humans* is to ponder, meditate, worry, or depress over things. *Sedentary* activity, the lot of them! *Sitting around*, gloomy, anxious, worried, depressed. (Frankly, there is more of *this* kind of brooding going on around us than I care to admit!)

Instead of feeling the *joy* of incubating something new, and the *pleasure* of *producing something* by hatching it, and then feeling the *warmth* and the security of being covered “beneath the wings of a *brooding hen*” -- a mother hen who is *God*, who comes to us in the person of Jesus, and who laments when we leave the nest -- we modern-day, urban, church-going Californians *sit around* meditating, pondering, discussing, without *doing* much about it. We’re *brooding!* We’re just not sure what we’re supposed to be *hatching*.

We’re *worrying*... dwelling gloomily on what’s wrong... meditating ourselves into a state of

depression. We spend more time *sedentary* than *ambulatory*; that is, there's a lot more *talk* than *walk*.

Well, maybe not here at Seaside Church, because we have among us several folks who come with walkers, some come in wheelchairs, others on crutches. Sometimes *it is hard just to walk* (right, Karen? Bruce? Genevieve) and it has nothing to do with our *mental state*, which is still *firing on all cylinders* and we're just wishing our feeble *bodies* could keep up! That's not what I'm talking about. To be sedentary out of *necessity* still allows the mind to expand.

Brooding is that temperament conducive to introspection, *contemplative* but often a bit *moody*. The overtones are *gloomy* rather than merely thought-ful. Instead of behavior suitable for producing offspring, the brooding Mother Hens among us tend to *hover* -- *protective hovering* over us, to be sure, but it feels more *looming* than loving. With those kinds of attitudes and emotions (where we ponder, meditate, worry, and depress), it's no wonder people flee!

"How often have I desired to gather your children together," says Jesus in his famous lament over Jerusalem, *"as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"*

That phrase "how *often* have I desired" to do this nurturing thing makes me think that he means *more than just Jesus' own efforts* to turn around the direction of his society, his religion, and the ruling class there in Jerusalem. He seems to be including John the Baptist's call for repentance -- which ended badly for the Baptist (with his head severed from his body and presented to King Herod on a silver platter!) -- and the many *ages* of sages, prophets, and preachers who had *already come* to the governors of Judea and the priests in the Temple *prior to Jesus*.

Jesus seems to be speaking from a standpoint *beyond* that of his earthly ministry. It even implies that *Jesus is the one* who has been sending the prophets throughout the years! Jesus is actually *speaking for God*, who has sent emissaries to the stubborn, willful, self-congratulatory leaders of Israel ever since they called Saul to be their first king a thousand years earlier.

Last Sunday, when we listened to Jesus' complaint against the Pharisees (which immediately precedes today's reading), he said: *"I send you prophets, sages, and scribes: some of whom you kill, and some crucify! Some you will flog in your synagogues; others you pursue from town to town."* (Matthew 23:34)

Who sends them? According to the Bible, it is the Lord God Yahweh who spoke through the prophets. It was God (not Jesus) who chose and called the prophets, sending them like lambs to be slaughtered by civic and religious leaders who wanted no criticism (*Thank you, very much!*) And yet here Jesus is speaking from a vantage point that is as close as possible to God's own experience of that hellish history. And when *Jesus* is rejected by these leaders -- as he assumes will soon be his fate -- it is clearly a *solidarity* with (a continuation of) the *earlier* rejection of *those* God had sent to Israel and Judea.

When Jesus says "how often I have sent" and "how often have I desired" he speaks from a unique, transcendent, timeless (dare we say 'divine?') status.

We suddenly glimpse in Jesus the *trans-historical* movement of God's Spirit that is embodied in the notion of "the Messiah": Savior, Son of God!

"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! See, your house is left to you desolate! ... You see all these [great buildings], do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon one another. All will be thrown down!" (Matthew 23:37-38 & 24:2)

Uh-oh! The *trans-historical* Jesus (the one who looked *back* in time) is now looking *forward* to what it about to come upon Jerusalem. Destruction.

Because the *present generation* of religious and civic leaders were behaving just like their *predecessors* had done ("*There is nothing new under the sun,*" said the Preacher of old Ecclesiastes), the rejection of Jesus and his followers was simply following a long-standing pattern of such rejection. And the outcome would be cataclysmic when Rome clamped down and destroyed the Jewish nation in the year 70, tearing down the Temple and all its buildings. Jesus weeps for this event *in advance* of its coming, because he has read the "handwriting on the wall." Luke's Gospel puts it best when he writes:

When [Jesus] drew near and saw the city, *he wept over it*, saying, "***Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes.***" (Luke 19:41-42)

It is a horrifying thought that, perhaps, *war* (the ultimate lack of peace) is the *logical outcome* from civic leaders egos & stubbornness, a society's injustices & greed, our personal unrighteousness & hate, plus a general *lack of love* toward others (those who are *not in our family*, our tribe, our group). Jesus saw war "looming" on the horizon, and the more he *confronted* the "powers that be," the more personally he felt *for their children*, the innocent ones who would bear the brunt of the "grown-ups" inability to make peace.

"Your house is left to you desolate! ... And all these [great buildings]? Not one stone will be left here upon one another. All will be thrown down!" (!)

I can imagine the disciples *confusion & concern* at these words from Jesus. (*All these great stones? All these huge buildings gone? Crushed to rubble in our own lifetime? Nonsense, Jesus! Get a grip. Get a clue.*)

Talk about "brooding!" If you want an example of *worrying words* – dwelling gloomily on what's wrong... meditating ourselves into a state of *depression* – Jesus is doing a good job of that on his own, don't you think?

The buildings the disciples pointed to on the Temple Mount were still *brand-new* in Jesus' day. They represented the *best*, most *prosperous*, and most powerful institutions of ancient Israel. The Capitol City's buildings were guarded by *the Roman legions*, for goodness sake, and ruled by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate! There was no way *an enemy* would *ever* be able to *breach Jerusalem's security*, get past the Temple authorities and their armed guards, overcome the Roman military (the most powerful army in the world!) and tear those huge buildings down.

I'm sure Jesus sounded *wacky!* In fact, it's the *opposite message* from what was expected from the Savior Messiah. He was supposed to be a *bringer of Peace and Prosperity*, ensuring the future of David's Kingdom and of the temple/palace complex for a thousand years! Not *weep* over war!

But we know from subsequent history that the Jewish Revolt against Rome, which began in the year 60 (scarcely 25 years after Jesus' execution) ended with the utter destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. In other words, everything Jesus speaks of here *actually happened*. (Some scholars suggest

that this part of the Gospel story wasn't written until AFTER the destruction of Jerusalem. I disagree; but I'm not a scholar. I'm just a Pastor-teacher.)

Jesus **warned them** that the great stones and huge buildings they so admired -- structures which gave them a sense of **national pride** -- would one day be **brought down**. So, maybe we shouldn't let **them** represent for us what we think **God** wants, nor what "power" is. Don't **trust** in social status, big buildings, money, force of arms, police powers, or military for security!

Jesus had already warned his followers that those who put themselves forward as **leaders**, claiming to come in the name of the Lord, were doing so only to **lead many astray**.

The scary scenario of those great national icons (the Temple & Palace in Jerusalem) **coming down in total ruin**, could come true only if the Roman Legions (who were guarding those holy places), and the Governor appointed by Caesar, and even King Herod (who **financed** and **engineered** the huge building that came to be called "the House of God") were, in fact, **not** doing God's Will! Their days were numbered; its demise was **imminent**.

Into the stunned silence (and disbelief) of his disciples, Jesus went on to say: "*When you hear of war & rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. ... It's only the beginning of the birth pangs!*" (Matthew 24:6-8) The painful birth contractions of **a new way of doing society**. The **Christian Way!** The **Gospel Way**. When the "Jesus Way" comes into being, people won't need huge temples, nor hierarchies of priests, no legions of soldiers, nor any of the other trappings of **wealth and power** that constitute an earthly Empire.

No "World Trade Center" of **economic** influence, no "Pentagon" of **military** might, will be needed to secure **God's Kingdom**... for it was already present **among them in humble ways**; in life-giving ways, com-passionate ways; in relational, meaningful, personal heartfelt inner ways. To have eyes to see that, meant looking at the world through God's eyes!

That's why Jesus could say to those civic leaders, those blind guides, those scribes & Pharisees: *You will not see me again until you're able to say "Blessed is he! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."*

Until the rulers of the people could **join in** the Jesus movement (which was Jesus' hope all along!) – assisting instead of resisting the Spirit of God – the path toward destruction was inevitable.

The transition from the traditional ways of **doing Religion** and **using the coercive powers of Empire** would not come easily. That was true in Jesus' day, and it's true in our own.

There would be fierce **resistance** on the part of the entrenched *status quo*. That's because **people in power** do not easily change their ways. And so, Jesus predicted that he (first) – and they (his disciples), and most sadly but certainly the coming generation who were only children at that time – would bear the brunt of the **civic anger, persecution, & violent resistance** that was building up among the populace.

To those who believed in what he was doing – those who did not let the civic & religious leaders lead them astray – Jesus said: "**Do not be alarmed.**" (Matt. 24:6) That is, we have no need to brood; no need to be worried, depressed. Be glad that you are under the wings of a brooding hen. As it says in Psalm 91: "*You who dwell in the shelter of the Lord, who abide in God's shadow for life... say to the Lord: My refuge, my rock, in whom I trust.*" (words & music by Michael Joncas, "On Eagles Wings",

And Jesus said further: “***The one who endures to the end will be saved.***” (Matt. 24:13) When the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security raises the “threat code” to orange, ***chill out.*** Fear not. Stay cool.

In those last days before his arrest, Jesus tried to ***warn*** his followers – ***to prepare them*** for the reality that was ***already looming on the horizon*** – and to reassure them that God’s ways were still good (and that God’s ways would ultimately prevail) even when the really bad stuff was hitting them hard! Both in the beginning and at the end of this ***scary scenario***, Jesus tells them (and through the Gospel writes, tells us) ***not*** to be alarmed. Don’t give in to terror-mongers, even in the midst of tribulation. ***Have no fear. Don’t brood about it!*** And don’t scatter! Don’t run away. God wants you safe and all together, like a family of chicks beneath the wings of a brooding hen.

Jesus’ message is clear ... but it’s hard to *hear* when, on the one hand, the people in power are busily feathering their own nest, believing all will be well with them in their day, & on the other, the images are so frightening!

If Jesus wanted to reassure the people of God’s heartfelt care for them, the Mother Hen image should’ve been enough. Don’t warn them of danger.

Maybe Jesus should have ***kept quiet*** about the chaos ***he*** saw on the horizon; especially their inability to do the kinds of things that would ***make for peace***. But he spoke up! He challenged the leaders, warned the people, and wanted to get at the truth of really important matters: such as ***justice, mercy, and faith*** (“weightier matters of the law”). It cost him his life.

Was it in vain?

Well, ***we’re here***, two thousand years later, still telling the Jesus story. Still trying to gather the chicks under God’s maternal wing! ***Still brooding*** (some of us) about war and peace, the global economy, trying to achieve justice for all. Jesus tells us ***not*** to brood; leave the brooding to God.

Do not be ***alarmed*** at the news of war. Do not ***give in*** to terror, not even in the midst of trials. ***Fear not!***

Those words may have sounded like nice, friendly, but ***ultimately empty*** phrases -- like what was sung by the angels to the shepherds on that first Christmas (“***Fear not, for tidings of great joy I bring!***”) -- were it not for the fact that ***Jesus said them*** in the very shadow of the Temple, under the marching boots of the Roman Armies, as he was about to face ***his*** greatest threat: his arrest by the authorities; his trial, torture, and death.

“*In that hour,*” he said to them, and he says to us, and (I suspect) he said to himself: “***Be not afraid, for God is with us!***”