

Gathering the Brood

In the first year I was ordained, I was gifted with a black, boiled wool funeral cope. It is made in England, is very heavy, and when worn with the detachable hood, I resemble the angel of death.

This particular garment has come in very handy at funerals, at Remembrance Day and Decoration Day services. On more than one occasion I have taken in a small child or two under the cope, to keep them sheltered from the wind or out of the cold. Whenever I wear this garment I am reminded of today's gospel. Jesus says "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings?" (Luke 13:34, NRSV)

There is a lot packed into a relatively short reading this morning. Usually, with a short reading such as today's I will parse it out sentence by sentence. Today is not that kind of day. I want to weave together a message for you from scripture, from imagery and from two events that occurred yesterday.

Yesterday a couple got married in Fernie. Not a big deal, really. Couples get married in Fernie all the time. This couple is a little different, in that they were a COVID couple. They got engaged in early 2020 and had hoped to be married that summer. Did not happen. They planned again for summer 2021. And again, it did not happen. So they decided to plan for March 2022.

We had two gorgeous days of sun and warmer than usual temperatures on Thursday and Friday. The groom's father was to marry them. And they had reserved Fernie Knox United Church as an inclement weather back-up. Despite the chilly weather, set more for a funeral than a wedding, Sean and Gill were married at Annex Park yesterday afternoon at 2:00 pm.

At the same time they were being married, I was at Rivercrest Cemetery in Sparwood, presiding over the burial of a family matriarch. But first, back to the scripture.

Jesus, Herod, the fox and the hen, and other wonderful imagery invoked in Luke's gospel for today.

Jesus uses imagery that has multiple meanings. He refers to Herod as a fox. A fox is cunning and swift, yet it is also small and stealthy. In the Jewish holiness code a fox was considered unclean.

If Jesus had wanted to use positive animal analogies for Herod, he would have used the image of a lion – an animal that is representative of royalty; one that is fierce, commanding and strong. Not a stinky, beady-eyed animal like a fox.

Jesus often referred to Pharisees as hypocrites as they liked to draw attention to their holiness, when in fact, to be truly righteous and holy, Jesus told us to pray without drawing attention to ourselves, to fast without making egregious faces in public, and to give alms without drawing attention to it. So it is interesting that it's the Pharisees who are warning Jesus that Herod is out to arrest him.

Unapologetically, Jesus tells the Pharisees to pass along a message “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.” (Luke 13.32, NRSV) Jesus knows that Herod is taking exception to Jesus working on the Sabbath and not only is he unapologetic, he intends to continue his work until it is finished, regardless of when the sabbath occurs.

That Jesus likens himself to a chicken is quite remarkable. He assigns motherly qualities in that he wishes he were a chicken, specifically a hen, so he could gather his brood under his wings.

Understand this: chickens are quite helpless and yet, they will protect their brood by gathering and hiding them from enemies such as foxes. When it comes to chickens, foxes are their most feared enemy. They will stalk their prey and will pick off the chickens, one at a time, or if in a frenzy will kill many of them and take what they wish back to their dens. When killing one at a time, foxes will leave nary a trace of any killing.

Jesus knows that Herod is stealthy, but he was not afraid of Herod's stealth or agility. Protecting the brood is Jesus' first and foremost duty.

There was a time, a generation or so ago, when men were not allowed to be nurturing and loving with their children. Their job was to go to work and provide a living for their family. Their spouse would stay home and raise the children, cook and tend the house.

Roles were clearly defined, and almost always strictly adhered to. In 1939 war broke out and with men at the front lines in battle, women went into the factories and farms to look after that work, as well as care for their families.

My mother made a comment to me many years ago, when my oldest nephew was barely a toddler. She mentioned that Melinda was at work and David was babysitting. I asked who he was babysitting and she replied, "Nathan". I suggested that as he is Nathan's father, he wasn't babysitting so much as he was parenting.

In today's society it is fairly common to see Baby Change Tables in men's washrooms, as it is also fairly common to see a father or uncle out with the baby and if that baby needs a change, there needs to be somewhere for that to happen.

One of the most destructive phrases of toxic masculinity is the phrase "man up". At the most basic level it means to take action and stop being emotional. At its most harmful it means if a man is expressing strong emotions such as fear, or sadness through crying, he is not, in fact, a "real man" and should not feel those emotions. He is told to "suck it up" and/or "man up".

Yesterday I presided over a funeral for a woman who was just 62. She died at home, unexpectedly, leaving behind a grown son and daughter, two older sisters, a gaggle of grandchildren and a plethora of nieces, nephews and other family who were utterly devastated. Rose had not been ill. She was still working. And she died, from a stroke, leaving behind a disbelieving and devastated family.

Her family is a rough and tumble family who, at first glance, do not appear to be particularly emotional. And yet, at the family visitation Friday night, her son wept openly. When I approached him to offer comfort, he quickly apologised and tried to contain himself. I assured him that no apology was necessary and it was good to see him showing his feelings. I left him to visit with his Mum and went to check on other relatives.

A little while later, his young nephew was in the hallway at Cherished Memories, crying the brokenhearted sobs of the inconsolable. His uncle came up, knelt down and told his nephew to let his feelings out. It was okay to cry and it was good he was expressing his emotions. As a hen gathers her brood, he was showing his nephew that it was okay to be sad and to cry. Pastors are often referred to as shepherds, when in some cases, we ought to be referred to as hens, because we will gather and protect our broods whenever and however we can.

My colleagues in both the Anglican and United Churches are trying to figure out what the best course of action is to keep everyone safe in our buildings, and in our communities. The PHOs or Public Health Orders have changed recently, dropping the mask mandate in public places. I have decided that we will continue to wear masks in the Worship spaces, when entering, exiting and while singing, until Easter, then we will reassess.

At yesterday's funeral I was the only one wearing a mask, which was my choice as I knew I would be with you today and wanted to keep myself, as well as everyone around me, as safe as possible. As a hen gathers her brood, I want to ensure you are as safe as can be.

And so, for the next while we will hold the course with abbreviated Worship, with one verse of each hymn, one reading instead of three and a psalm. We will continue with hand sanitizing, mask wearing, physical distancing and no coffee time together. These things will change, it's simply a matter of when.

The reality of the Coronavirus and it's myriad of variants, is that we have not seen our last lock-down or roll-back. Eventually we will move from pandemic to endemic where we are aware of the virus, and of its strength in the world, yet we no longer need to be as vigilant locally because the spread has lessened or stopped. As a hen gathers her brood under her wings.

The Matriarch of the Edmonson family has died. Their Mother Hen is no longer with them. It remains to be seen who will take over that nurturing role. Will it be her daughter Toni? Her son Terrance? Or someone else in the family. Will Rose's legacy continue with her generation or the next?

During most funeral sermons, I invite those gathered to imagine a thread of their favourite colour. Next, imagine one of their favourite things, or memories about the deceased. As those stories are shared, we weave together a tapestry of the deceased. It's not meant to resemble them in a portrait manner, rather, it is meant to be a symbolic rendering of their life.

For Rose there would be an open can, not bottle, of Pepsi, high-test, NOT the diet crap. There would be a pack of Canadian Classic cigarettes, regular size NOT king size, her favourite cardigan which smells faintly of cigarette smoke and one of her special grandma hugs. The would be the world's greatest

pizza, as well as cookies, singed slightly on the bottom, and loaves of bread with a slightly browned, well, blackened top.

When you think of those significant people in your life, who have died, what does their tapestry resemble to you?

For Jesus, I think his tapestry would resemble a hen with her brood under her wings. A man grieving the death of his friend. A rabbi teaching his followers that relationship is more important than doctrine. A teacher washing the feet of his students, showing them that to serve is much greater than being served. A son calling out to his mother, in fear and agony, while nailed to a tree.

There would be loaves and fishes. There would be bread and wine. There would be laughter and tears. There would be boats, and nets, and fish, and tides. There would be gold, frankincense and myrrh. There would be rocks and trees. And woven through it all would be an infinite amount of love.

For as much as we are in the season of Lent and Lent is meant to be a time of renewal, when we gather for a wedding or for a funeral, it is a time of renewal.

The realisation that you have been with your beloved, longer than you've been without her.

The witnessing of two people pledging before God that they will love only one other for the rest of their lives.

Walking with a family struggling to come to terms with the sudden and unexpected death of their matriarch. Life for them will never resemble what it once did, but it will go on. In a new way.

As a pastor gathers shivering children under her black wool funeral cope, so a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings. To bring protection, to provide safety, to give warmth, and the promise of another day.

Days filled with sunshine, and days filled with sleety rain.

Days by the duck pond, and days overlooking the mine site.

Days where two people join themselves to each other for the rest of their lives, and days where a family gathers at the graveside of their matriarch wondering how their lives will go on without her.

As a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings, know that you are part of that brood. Remember that when times feel difficult and there seems to be

more darkness than light; remember that there will always be the one from whom we glean the light.

The light that no darkness can overcome.

Jesus, the Christ.

Amen.

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