

The Shield of Faith
(Luke 13:31-35)

3/16/25
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Today's Gospel is the Mother Hen reading. Jesus compares himself to a Mother Hen looking after her chicks. And by doing so, he highlights God's desire to be our protector. God wants to protect us from harm; Jesus desires to protect the people of Jerusalem. And God wants us to protect the people around us who are vulnerable.

And the wings of the hen symbolize that protection. The wings are not something that the hen can just take off and put on again. They are a permanent part of her body; the design she is born with. Her wings are in her DNA.

Jesus uses an everyday observation taken from the barnyard to help us understand what is in God's heart, when God looks on us. What is more watchful and tenaciously protective than a Mother Hen? What is more reassuring and comforting to her chicks than the warmth and shelter provided by the downy underside of her wings. And what is more vulnerable and easily frightened than a baby chick? Those adorable little furry yellow balls, running around and peeping. Your heart goes out to them.

When Jesus compares himself to a Mother Hen protecting her chicks, he is also complementing his role as the Good Shepherd and protector of the flock, which echoes the role his ancestor David played as the shepherd King. So, when we hear this morning's Gospel in light of all of this, we see that protecting the vulnerable is a major emphasis. And being like a "Mother Hen" just adds to that emphasis.

And what is it that Jesus wants to defend? It is always the same. It is the gift of a life fed by grace; a life that we symbolize by the candle each one of us holds on Christmas Eve. That fragile, beautiful and mysterious light, full of hope, joy, peace and love that is his gift to all of us. It is a gift that needs to be shielded from the predators in this world; from the pharaohs and King Herod's, who are threatened by it and seek to extinguish it.

Fire in the Barn

I once heard a story based on today's Gospel that really brought home to me an understanding of how the Mother Hen foreshadows the cross and fits into Lent. It is a story that compares the love of Jesus to that of a Mother Hen in a barn fire. In the pandemonium, the chicks come rushing under their mother's wing for safety. And after the fire, the Mother Hen's barbecued body is found among the ashes of the barn.

But out from under her charred wings come the peeping sounds of her chicks that, thanks to her, survived the fire.

It's a gruesome story meant to illustrate how Jesus suffered and died on the cross in order to protect us from those powers in the world that would destroy us. It is a story meant to ensure that we are really on the journey of Lent with Jesus. It is also a story about following in his footsteps and recognizing that, as his body today, we are to take up crosses of our own by being protectors of the vulnerable like him.

So, as a Lenten Meditation, it is worth thinking about what it is we see as barn fires that threatens those who are vulnerable around us today.

Sending blankets and providing food and other materials to those who have been made vulnerable by weather and warfare is one way we provide wings to shelter others.

Educating ourselves is another way in which we provide shelter. All of our professions, from the doctor who wards off diseases, to the farmers who feed us; these are all educated ways in which we provide shelter for each other by knowing what we know.

Educating ourselves gives us wings to provide greater protection to the vulnerable, to shelter them from those things that threaten to extinguish

the light within; things like hunger, lack of heat, loneliness, or the feeling of being different and misunderstood or unloved.

And educating ourselves about the nature of the media that informs us; about the content that comes out of our smart phones and televisions, is also one of the ways we can be protectors. Because so many stories are like fire starters.

But how can we handle the media in a way that is protective in the way God wants us to be protective. If we avoid the media altogether, we have no early warning system and the fires that are raging will catch us unaware.

At the same time, if we are too attentive to it, we can easily become the tools of those who use the airwaves to generate outrage in ways that divide us and destroy our ability to love each other. This is a very difficult question. We need to be discern ways to be informed and not disinformed and to share important information without feeding the fire.

Ultimately, we have to see that it is Jesus who is the protector in the Gospel story. We are the vulnerable chicks, and it is by coming under his wing that we survive. I mean this very literally. That you and I must open our bibles and read and reflect on his story in Matthew, Mark, Luke

and John, slowly in detail and with the kind of time that most of us give to our televisions and smart phones.

We wonder why so many things are going wrong in our world, and all the while the majority of the population are like baby chicks running around in a barn on fire, doing everything but come under the wings of Jesus.

There is a sense in which the Bible, and many of the readings during Lent seem out of step with our culture today. We want to be optimistic and to stay focused on the bright side, and the bible continually bring us face to face with hard realities and difficult challenges.

But the Gospel story is actually the most optimistic story possible, which is what makes it possible to be honest and also face the real hardships of life. There is also always a silver lining running through the story, that is easily overlooked, but should never be overlooked. And that is that this precious thing that we are to protect is very real; the flame of love that burns within us and in those around us is not just something we imagine. In fact, it is the most real thing in the world. And its beauty and value is not just something we imagine either. It is real. And beholding it transforms us from creatures wandering in meaninglessness

into joyful creatures bathed in grace, so that regardless of what is going on around us, we know that we are blessed.

That burning flame of love within us is the most precious thing that we have and it is the thing which, if we stay focused on it, will bless us for eternity.

As I was finishing this sermon, this morning, I began to reflect on the funeral yesterday, a better ending to this sermon came to me. When we as a congregation, and as a community, minister to the needs of a sister who has suffered the crushing loss of her son, coming together in support of her and her family and his friends, and when together we honored and gave thanks for the life of Jonathan Paul O’Gara, we were the hen that provides the comforting wing that our world needs.

And so while it was a difficult experience for everyone; it was also a time of gratitude and joy for the gift of life. And that is something worth protecting and worthy of our dedication.