



## Sermon

February 28, 2010  
The Second Sunday in Lent  
Historic St. George's United Methodist Church  
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

### Mother Jesus

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem...How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!* (Luke 13:34)

Contemporary British artist Stanley Spencer (1954) set out to create a series of forty Lenten paintings depicting what Jesus might have been doing during each of his days in the wilderness.\* In one, Spencer sees Jesus lying on desert-looking ground. Behind him a hen is sitting on an egg. In the distance there is a rooster and another hen. In the foreground, Jesus' body forms an enclosure for another hen and her brood. It is as if they are nesting in his arms. One chick is scratches for food, another flaps its wings, another is under the hen's wings, another is under Jesus' garment. Jesus watches attentively.

What does he see? Comfort. Shelter. Warmth. Care. Compassion. Support. Safety. Maternal strength.

Whatever Spencer saw in his mind's eye, he also imagined Jesus flashing back to day he looked down onto Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, that day towards the end of his life, when he says: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem. How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

I am drawn to this image of Jesus. What about you?

When I was a child I learned to sing songs like:

My God is so big, so strong and so mighty,  
there's nothing my God cannot do.

The mountains are his, the rivers are his; the stars are his handiwork to;

My God is so big, so strong and so mighty,  
there's nothing my God cannot do.

Coming to experience God, it was parents and grandparents nestling with me in the family pew week after week, slipping me candy, shushing when the wrappers made noise. It was the tender teaching of stories and songs in Sunday School, gentle, firm discipline to a can't-sit-still-kid. It was the including, big-brother care of a youth leader. It was and is the brood of embracing, supportive friends, a place at the Lord's table with them and fellow seekers that keeps me in the church, looking for God, trying to follow Jesus. Through it all, I have been more hen-loved than hen-pecked.

I am drawn to this image of Jesus as mother hen because he is doing a God-thing, being a gatherer – calling folk together in safety from what's dangerous, frightening, confusing, hurtful, separating, and scattering. This is why we call the places we gather in his name, "sanctuary."

God's people don't always do the gathering thing well. Matter of fact we've been known to be divisive. But that's not what Spencer's sees here in Jesus or Luke, who puts tears in the Lord's eyes looking over fractured. Jerusalem. How quickly we forget Jesus was not primarily a teacher of correct beliefs and right doctrine. Jesus was a teacher of a way that transformed people from legalistic rule-followers into seeing the world as God's realm, thru God's eyes and experiencing it through the divine heart.

What was so holy and marvelous in our comings together, St. George's and Mother Bethel, over these past months is our being drawn back together beyond the hurts, hostilities and pain of the past.

I have this vision of Mother Theresa (a gather-er extraordinaire) entering our more bitter divisions over faith and practice. I imagine her on a Larry King panel, between Pat Robertson and Bishop Spong, in a conversation that opens towards the other instead of one-ups them. Mother Teresa took being a person of faith to another level, embodying compassion as the heart and soul of Jesus. Her sense of presence, her words and actions gather Jesus' brood to recognize a world continually crucifying God's love by wars of aggression, torturing prisoners, allowing people to live in poverty and homelessness, dying of AIDS and obesity, going without health insurance, and stigmatizing because of ethnicity or sexuality.

I am also drawn to the Jesus' image of a hen gathering her brood because it is an image about the power of wings.

Who can forget the horrible story of Matthew's Shepherd's beating, tied to a fence, left to die, in Laramie, Wyoming. Matthew was gay which is why his attackers killed him, they said. At his funeral, a Christian minister, Fred Phelps and his crew, held signs expressing hate, "God hates fags" and the like, saying Matthew's death was God's justice.

But there was this wing-thing that happened. Not wanting Matthew's family to be victims of such mean-spirited hate, somebody from the town organized a group to make and wear huge angel wings (in the play *The Laramie Project*, town's people describe them as "big ass wings") encircling the protestors, blocking their venomous message.

I am drawn to Jesus' gathering as a hen gathers her brood because it is an image about the power of wings.

14th century mystic, Julian of Norwich, saw this image of Jesus as a key to understanding the befuddling doctrine of the Holy Trinity. As

fatherhood conveys things like power and provision, motherhood means loving-kindness and wisdom. "As truly as God is our Father, God is our Mother. Our Father (God) wills, our Mother (Christ) works and our good Lord, the Holy Spirit confirms," she writes.

Julian lived in the time of the Black Plague, the 100 Year's War, and crises in church authority, schism. Caught up in the depressed spirit of her times, Julian prayed for an early death until she found sanctuary in a church. (We're at our best, church when we have open wings for seekers!). She never left, living the rest of her life there.

Her affirmations about the goodness of creation, beauty, and unconditional love of God stand in stark contrast to others who stress God's anger, indignation, wrath and judgment towards a sinful world. Her most remembered saying is: "All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well." One feels the calling, gathering and nestling to powerful wings in these words. One hears a mother's voice repeating: "It's gonna be all right. It's gonna be all right." through disbelief, tears, depression, hopelessness, scrapes, scratches, disappointing and being a disappointment. No GOTCHA God here.

No matter what's happening in you life, here's someone NOT telling you to DO something, or HOW TO fix something, or WHAT YOU NEED TO DO to make things better. Here is someone bringing you in, holding you, sheltering you under warm, golden wings. "It's gonna be all right. It's gonna be all right."

We Methodists know one of Jesus' mother hens, Susannah Wesley. Talk about a big wing span, her gathering, nestling, caring, compassionate, sheltering love to a brood of nineteen children, (fifteen surviving) showed more than just mastery of family organization,. She was pretty much a single Mom, her minister husband gone much of the time. She taught the girls to read, not just the boys – English and the classical languages. In those days, when you didn't like the minister, you had him hauled off to jail. It got so bad for the Wesleys that, one unhappy time, parishioners set

the rectory on fire. Young John Wesley (Methodism's founder) jumped from a second story window. It doesn't take much imagination to visualize whose arms John ran to. Or why he and the early Methodists preached with passion how much God loved the world, lest people perish without experiencing it.

If you've ever loved someone you could not totally protect, then you understand what Jesus means when he says: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem...How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them.

This is the most vulnerable posture in the world. Another reason this image speaks to me – wings spread, the breast exposed, God in Jesus become vulnerable to and for us.

Of all the animals in all creation, why does Jesus choose a hen? The Lion of Judah roaring enemies into submission is more confident and powerful. Think about it and you recognize it is so Jesus, turning things upside down, messing with expectations about the way things should be. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it: "Of course Jesus chooses the chicken, which is about as far away from being a fox as you can get. That way the options are clear: you either live by licking your chops or you die protecting your chicks. Jesus won't be king of the jungle in this or any story. What he will be is a mother hen."

Just outside of Jerusalem there is a chapel called Dominus Fleuit (Lat. "our Lord wept"). Dominus Fleuit is on the itinerary of every Holy Land tour group. Inside the chapel, behind the Lord's Table is a large picture window looking across the Kidron Valley to Jerusalem, the Dome of the Rock, the site of the Herod's Temple, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher all visible. Above this vista the words inscribed are the ones Jesus said from this very spot: Jerusalem, Jerusalem...How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

"...and you were not willing." Those five words are like indigestion – tough to stomach in the presence of gathering, compassionate, warming, welcoming, protective wings. "...and you were not willing." There is vulnerability in gathering with God, enveloped in her wingspan. There is vulnerability in God's leaving herself wide open to wounded-ness for us.

This is who we are with God. This is who God is with us. This is God and us, trying to make a way forward in the world with genuine love on the loose, despite the cost or risk. Resurrection is never far away.

I learned another children's song later in my life:

God is like a mother giving birth,  
a father crying why such pain,  
a hen gathering her brood.  
Who know the face of God,  
who can know God's form,  
who sees the face of love  
has seen God's love reborn.

God, draw us closer and closer to you. And in the shadow of your wings, make us yours, truly yours. Amen.

\* Spencer completed 18 sketches of the 40 Christ in the wilderness pieces he envisioned. Only 8 were completed as paintings, all of which are on display at The Art Gallery of Western Australia (<http://www.artgallery.wa.gov.au/index.asp>).

■■■ Amen ■■■