The Fox and the Hen

Based on Luke 13:31-35

(Klaudia Smucker, August 21, 2011)

In Friedman's Fables, there is a story called *The Friendly Forest.*[1] In this forest, there was a lamb that lived happily until a tiger came to live among them. The lamb sheepishly expressed her reservations about that. To comfort her, the other animals made a rule that the condition for living in the forest was that you must also let all the other animals live in the forest.

The lamb went about her life as usual. But it wasn't long before the tiger began to growl and make threatening gestures and menacing motions at her. When she talked with her other friends about this, they said, "Don't worry, that's just how tigers behave." But the tiger didn't stop his behavior, and soon the lamb found herself looking out for the tiger. And every now and then the tiger would leap out at her and scare her. Finally the lamb decided to leave. She realized that she couldn't live in a forest with a tiger. It was ruining her life.

Some of her friends said, "Oh lamb, this can be worked out. Stay calm. Let's sit down together and talk about this with the tiger." The lamb was getting impatient. Her friends had already explained away the tiger's behavior by saying it was the tiger's nature to behave the way he did. Her friends thought that there could be compromise, but it didn't seem like the tiger was willing to compromise. And she thought, "There is something wrong with the notion that an agreement is equal if the invasive creature agrees to be less invasive and the invaded one tolerates some invasiveness."

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[1] Friedman, Edwin H. Friedman's Fables. The Guilford Press. NY. p. 25-28. 1990.

Her forest friends said, "Just speak strongly to the tiger and tell him you won't put up with it."

Finally, one of the less subtle animals spoke up. "I've never heard of anything so ridiculous. If you want a lamb and a tiger to live in the same forest, you don't try to make them communicate. You cage the tiger."

At the beginning of this particular section of stories, Friedman says, "The colossal misunderstanding of our time is the assumption that insight will work with people who are unmotivated to change. Communication does not depend on syntax, eloquence, rhetoric, or articulation but on the emotional context in which the message is being heard."[2]

In our text today, there is no tiger and no lamb, but we have a fox and a hen. Our story is not exactly the same, but there are some similarities. There is fear, and a concern for safety. There are characters in the story who, for a variety of reasons, are either unable or unwilling to change. The difference is that Jesus is the one person in the story with an understanding of the personalities of the characters, and clarity about his own purpose and his ability to choose. And we have the hen, not some character too chicken to act, but one who is fiercely protective and longs for us to understand and gather together under her wings.

Jesus is warned by the Pharisees that Herod is out to get him. Jesus had reason to be afraid of Herod. Herod had recently put his cousin John the Baptist to death. Whether the Pharisees were trying to play on his fears or not, they were probably right to warn him about this unstable, insecure governor. But Jesus refuses to be driven by fear. He calls Herod a fox, a sly, destructive nuisance, and chooses to focus on his mission. He has

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[2] Ibid. pg. 5

places to go, people to see, things to do, and a limited amount of time. The gospel tells us that he has set his face toward Jerusalem.

Jesus once again turns down an opportunity to turn a problem into a political situation. I don't know if Jesus had a moment of panic when he was told that Herod wanted to kill him. He had every reason to be paranoid. But once again, we see him take the higher road by remembering God's purpose for him. Knowing God intimately was one important part of Jesus' life, but it didn't stop there. He faithfully remembered that he had healing to get done, and places to go to carry out God's mission in the world. For the Pharisees in Luke, fear of change kept them from hearing God's words and gathering under God's wings, and following Jesus.

Jesus also knew from history that his biggest threats were not the political leaders of the day, but the established religious hierarchy right under his nose. He lamented this sad situation. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"

Jerusalem was where all good followers of God would try to go, but it was also the place that killed its prophets. Throughout history, from the Old Testament to the New Testament, the religious and political leaders of Israel struggled with greed, power, and unwillingness to change their ways. The people in the city that housed God's temple also dug in their heels as they held onto a stubborn resistance to God's words for them.

For some of the Pharisees, their commitment to the law blinded them to understanding the essence of the law and who Jesus was. They heard him speak time and time again, but they would not or could not listen to his words. Their own agendas kept them from receiving the compassion and

love of Jesus. All of this made Jesus sad. There is nothing that hurts so much as to offer love and have that love rejected. Jesus' heart was broken by the people he loved. He longed to protect his people from heading away from God. Yet Jesus' response to them reminded them of the ways God longed for them. God wanted to comfort and protect them, to gather them under his wings. In the gospel stories, the people who responded to Jesus, and whom Jesus gathered along the way, were the lepers, the bent over woman, the man born blind; people who knew they needed change, or had a need, and wanted life to be different. They were people motivated to change, to seek out a life that could be a little bit better, and maybe a little less painful.

It would be easy to distance ourselves from this gospel text, since most of us, I hope, don't have someone who wants to kill us. Most of us haven't stoned any prophets lately, at least not with rocks. Yet for all of us, the underlying issue is, how do we respond to our particular tiger in the forest? What is it that threatens us? How do we stay focused on God and on God's purposes when we are afraid, or overwhelmed, or sad, or worried?

In the movie Gran Torino, a story of sacrifice and redemption, Clint Eastwood plays a crotchety old man named Walt Kowalski. Walt is one of the few homeowners left in a neighborhood that has been taken over by a Hmong gang. In spite of the danger of the neighborhood, Walt chooses to stay. When he befriends a Hmong teenager who had tried to steal his car, he realizes that his new friend Thao, and Thao's sister Sue, will never be safe or at peace as long as the gang exists. Walt knows what he needs to do, and figures out a way to restore justice in the neighborhood, even though he knows he will probably die.

All of us have had moments where something has made us afraid, out of control, overwhelmed, and helpless; moments where fear has gripped our throats and squeezed our chests, so that we can hardly breathe. When I've felt like that, it's hard to maintain any focus on God, let alone decide what my next move might be. So often, I try to figure it out myself, and like the lamb, talk and worry about it, and get nowhere. During one time like that, all I could think of was to pray a combination of prayers from various Ann LaMott books, "Help. Help. Help. Breathe. Eat. Take a walk. Be kind to yourself. Remember that God is present when you suffer." That prayer reminded me that I have a God that I can cry out to; one that is present even when I feel like I am drowning in sadness. In those moments, when I realize that I need God and finally move under the shelter of God's wings, and stay there for awhile, the warmth of God's love fills me with just enough strength to keep going forward.

When Jesus was alone in the wilderness, going through one temptation after another, it was his deep relationship with God that got him through the wilderness experience. The acronym HALT stands for hungry, angry, lonely, and tired. If you find yourself with these needs, you find yourself at a vulnerable place. It is a sign that you need to take care of yourself. Jesus experienced all of those in the wilderness. The Spirit was with him as he remembered God's words and felt God's presence. As awful as that time had to be, it made him stronger, as he chose to be faithful to the relationship that he had with God. And filled with the power of the Spirit, he returned to Galilee. That deep relationship with God helped Jesus to remember his purpose, and to follow God's plan, not Herod's.

As God works within our hearts and souls, and we sense that something isn't right, do we behave like the tiger, and make the other people

in the forest miserable? Are we like the lamb, responding out of fear, or spending an inordinate amount of time worrying and complaining? Sometimes we may need to cage the tiger to provide safety, love, and peace. Sometimes a punching bag, a long run, or a good cry, like Jesus had for his city, might help.

When Jesus looks at our lives, what might cause him to mourn for us? If we substitute our names where it says, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem," what would Jesus long for from us? What attitudes, what actions, what failures to act, and what thoughts demand our repentance? The people of Jerusalem resisted gathering under God's wings. It would be natural to resist judgment, but this is not judgment. This lament is a longing to embrace, to take in and keep warm, to extend grace. Why would they resist that? Why do we resist that? If we're honest, we would all admit that we want nothing more than to be loved and cared for and accepted. But to huddle under God's wings, to say I need you God, to admit that we don't know what to do, is to admit vulnerability.

Philip Yancey says, "I sense in that spasm of emotional pain something akin to what a parent feels when a son or daughter goes astray. Or the pain of a man or woman who has just learned a spouse has left - the pain of a jilted lover. It is a helpless, crushing pain of futility, and it staggers me to realize that the Son of God himself emitted a cry of helplessness in the face of human freedom. Not even God, with all his power, can force a human being to love." And I add, "or follow."

Neither God nor Jesus is the fox in this story, but the hen, who gently cares for her young. My grandpa had guineas and chickens running around his barnyard. I saw a hen go after a dog once, and let him know in no uncertain terms to leave her chicks alone. But a hen is no match for a fox.

Why Jesus didn't use the image of an eagle, or something stronger and more powerful? This image speaks about God's upside down kingdom and the character of his ministry. God longs to love us and to gather us in under those wide, expansive wings; to give us warmth, and grace, and love. We will occasionally find ourselves hungry, angry, lonely, and tired. We will be afraid, through no fault of our own. We may not be able to choose what happens to us, but we can, in the midst of fear, choose to turn towards God, and like Jesus, continue to walk forward, knowing that God longs for us to be comforted and to come to Him. God hasn't moved, will we?