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Lent 2

As I sat with the biblical readings assigned for this week, the theme that kept rising up for me was fear. The Old Testament selection began with Abraham's vision where the Lord proclaimed to him, "Do not be afraid." Then our Psalm declared, "The Lord is my light and salvation; whom shall I fear?" These readings seemed to say that there's no reason to fear...that God has it all under control.

And yet we find fear in our Gospel when we hear the story of the Pharisees warning Jesus that Herod wants to kill him. John the Baptist had recently been beheaded by Herod...so there was every reason for Jesus to fear this threat. And maybe he did. But Jesus' response was to assert that he intended to fulfill his mission...that he wouldn't let fear stand in his way. And then he spoke of his desire to protect people, to mother them, like a hen protecting her chicks.

If only Jesus, like a hen, could tuck the world under his wing, and protect us all from our fears. I imagine that most of us are experiencing some level of fear these days...right along with grief and anxiety and anger and apprehension and exhaustion and whatever else we may be feeling.

And we might wonder as we sit in worship this morning, where's God in all of this? Where's God in our fear and in the great suffering that we see in the world?

The reassurances of the Psalmist, to be honest, just aren't enough for me. I *want* to put aside my fear...and trust in the Lord. But that's easier said than done.

It can feel like we've been riding waves of fear and grief for a couple of years now. Two years ago, we shut down the church and much of our lives when the pandemic hit. And in that time, in addition to our fears and anxieties related to COVID, we've experienced what seems like a litany of other tragedies. We've witnessed the racial unrest in our nation in response to the killings of innocent black men and women like Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, just to name a few. We lived through an election that was incredibly divisive for our country and culminated in the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6 of last year, where a mob attempted to thwart the results of a free and democratic election. We witnessed the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan after 20 years of failed nation-building and saw the devastation that erupted in the power vacuum that we left behind. We've watched with broken hearts as our country has failed to deal humanely with the thousands of people trying to cross borders into the United States, fleeing violence and seeking opportunities for themselves and their families. We've experienced or seen on the news the devastating impact of climate change caused by our human behaviors—the wildfires, flooding, drought and other disasters that have taken lives and destroyed habitats.

And then two weeks ago, Russia invaded Ukraine. And we've seen and heard little else on our TVs, radios, and smartphones. We've been witness to the streams of people desperately seeking safety in neighboring countries...witness to those who stayed to fight...witness to the tanks and bombed buildings...and even witness to the dead bodies.

And maybe, we don't have a right to complain about *our* anxiety and exhaustion and grief when the war in Ukraine and other wars are being fought on soil far from us. But our bodies don't care about what we have a right to feel or not. We are anxious and exhausted and grieving and scared.

So I didn't feel a lot of comfort hearing the word of the Lord that came to Abraham: "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." I don't really feel like this world and its people are shielded from much. And I don't much feel like waiting patiently for the Lord as our Psalmist calls us to do.

But I was touched by Luke's comparison of Jesus to a mother hen. Rather than worry about his own life, Jesus wanted "to gather [his] children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wing."

As I was thinking about that image of Jesus as a mother hen, I actually googled "hen protecting chicks." I found this video of hens protecting their chicks from a variety of enemies: a goat, a cow, a human, a duck, a cat and dog, even another hen. The mother hens in that video were fierce. Every time even one chick was in danger, they put themselves between whatever the threat was and their chicks, willing to sacrifice their own lives for the protection of their children.

How lovely to imagine Jesus, our God, as a mother hen wanting to protect us from the violence and threats of this world. As any mother will tell you, there's a fierceness that comes out when our children are in danger. But at some point, as mothers, we realize that we can never eliminate every possible danger our children will encounter or every suffering they will experience.

That is true for Jesus, our mother hen, as well. Jesus' desire to protect and shield us is real, I believe, but the world is still what it is.

And in that world that we all know too well, how do we make sense of a God that whispers, "Do not be afraid." A God who desires our protection, to tuck us under her wing. Where is *that* God in the midst of *this* world where fear and suffering are all around us?

When I am struggling with those questions, I often think of the writing of Nicholas Wolterstorff. He is an American philosopher and theologian who lost one of his children, his twenty-five year-old son in a mountain climbing accident. Nicholas wrote about his grief in a book, "Lament for a Son." And it is his words from that book that I always come back to when wrestling with this question: where is God when the world is suffering? Wolterstorff wrote,

"God is not only the God of the sufferers but the God who suffers. ... It is said of God that no one can behold his face and live. I always thought this meant that no one could see his splendor and live. (pause) A friend said perhaps it meant that no one could see his sorrow and live. Or perhaps his sorrow is splendor. ... Instead of explaining our suffering God shares it."¹

God shares in our suffering. This is why we have Jesus, God incarnate, God made flesh. God needed us to know that humanity is not alone in suffering. That God was

• ¹ *Lament for a Son*. Grand Rapids: [William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.](#) 1987.

willing to walk through all of the hardships and sorrows of this world not simply with us but as one of us.

So Jesus is one of us, but Jesus is also the mother hen, tucking us under her wings for protection. May we find comfort from that image. May we feel the warmth of being pressed against the body of Jesus and comforted.

We know, all too well, that suffering will go on. God does not seek to make sense of it for us, but simply to share in it with us.

And perhaps, from time to time, we can allow God to hold the suffering of the world for us so that we can take a rest. After all, it is not ours to bear alone. Amen.