

SERMON
2nd Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2010

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
Psalm 27
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 13:31-35

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

A few years ago there were twin hippopotami born at the Memphis Zoo. The famous actress Cybil Shepherd, who is herself the mother of twins and a native of Memphis, was asked to name the twin hippos. The only problem was that the mother hippo, Julie, wouldn't let anyone close enough to the babies to determine their sex.

Apparently the two 40 pound babies paddled or walked just under Julie. And from what I understand, nobody, I mean nobody wanted to upset a momma who weighs more than a Mack truck.

Now I don't know exactly what a hippo does to protect her young, but I suspect that it wouldn't be pleasant. Therefore, there was a long delay in the naming of Julie's offspring. In any case, it didn't seem to matter a whole lot.

Julie continued to care for her babies – feeding them, protecting them, keeping them close to herself and away from danger. And the babies, untroubled by their nameless state, didn't stray far at all from Julie. As young and as dumb as they basically were, these baby hippos still knew a good thing when they saw it.

That good thing being a two ton, funny looking, gray and pink creature who seemed to always provide them with just what they needed. Indeed, why should they stray?

In some respects, hippos, cats, bears, birds, and just about any other animal knows more than humans.

The young, at least, have sense enough to stay close to momma; close to food, protection, warmth, and nurture.

You won't find kittens turning away from the warm fur they know so well. Chicks don't stray far from the protection of the hen's wings. Such behavior would be counter to their nature – counter to the natural order God created.

Sure, we can say that it's just instinct, but it is the case that even the least intelligent animal offspring stays close to the one who gave them life.

So what about human beings? Well, that's another story. It seems that only human beings stray from the one who gives them life. Certainly we might stay close to our earthly mothers – some a little too close – especially when it involves the need for money.

But as people of faith, we also know that God is our true source of life. For God is the creator and sustainer of all life. Even so, we as humans sometimes reflect the unnatural behavior of turning away from the love and protection of the God who gives us birth.

Today, Jesus cries out; “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

In these words of Jesus, we hear the voice of God's lamenting. We hear the sound of God's heart breaking with the tender fierce love of a mother.

For God loves his children. And yet, says Jesus, the children have strayed. They have killed the prophets and stoned those sent to them.

Therefore, through Jesus, God is weeping over Jerusalem, the holy city which was given to his children. The city and its people have become corrupt and foul. They have turned their backs on God.

Did you know that the Hindus believe that the Ganges River in India is a goddess, and that anyone who is immersed in that river becomes purified? They figure that if you die and have your ashes poured into the Ganges, your soul will go straight to heaven.

The Hindus believe that. Even though; 114 cities dump their raw sewage into it, and tens of thousands of people bathe in it each day. Every year some 40,000 cremated bodies; 3,000 corpses; and 9,000 dead cattle are dumped into it.

In fact, so much decaying matter is dumped into the Ganges River that the methane gas that is released causes the water to bubble. And you thought Lake Houston was bad.

In the same way, Jerusalem was always considered to be a holy place. But now we hear Jesus lamenting on how the city's holiness has become corrupt and polluted.

How could such a thing be? How could the children of Israel have been so foolish, so rebellious as to turn away from the warm wings of love and protection offered to them? Especially, when those wings had brought them safe through so many difficulties in the past. Especially when God had delivered them time and again from their enemies, and had blessed them with so much.

Perhaps we will never have the answer to this question. However, could we ask ourselves the same question?

How could we do such a thing? How can we be so foolish or behave so unnaturally as to stray from the sheltering love of God? The question, you see, turns back on you and me.

Or can some of us boast otherwise?

Can any one of us say that we have never trembled through a troubled night? Have any of us ever felt the dread of death, or of old age, as it draws ever nearer to us or to those we love?

Who among us has not felt the fear of loneliness, or not worried about the safety of our children? Who among us has not been agonized by the uncertainties surrounding our jobs and finances?

Is there anyone here who has not experienced the pain of a relationship gone sour; the devastation of divorce, the horror of abuse?

Who among us can say that there have not been mornings when we've been ashamed to look in the mirror at our own reflection because of something we've said, or done? Ashamed because of how we've hated, envied, lusted, or lied while we wandered far from God's wings?

“How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings” says Jesus.

God's lamenting cry rings sharply in our ears because we too “would not.” We would not hear the call of comfort, the cry of invitation. We would not entrust our worries, our pain, our sin, to the wings of God.

Instead we prefer to peck here and there in the hopes that we will stumble upon some morsel that will fill our stomachs, numb our minds, and take our thoughts away from how we have separated ourselves from God.

“How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.”

Listen – hear – the voice of invitation is speaking, the call to protection and unconditional love.

“Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

Even now the Mother hen would gather us in the shadow of outstretched wings, warm and secure next to the beating heart of God.

Even now, God bids us to come, to trust, and to rely on his protection and nurture and guidance through our stressful days.

God has called to us many times. The first call came long ago for many of us; when we were born in the waters of baptism, in the blood of Christ, into God's family, God's holy brood.

You see, it is through our baptism that God births us, and pledges to us the devotion, love and protection that we humans can only see dimly mirrored in the behavior of animals.

But where animals can and will protect and care for their young only for a time, God pledges love and nurture for eternity. This is the true security, true protection we are offered.

So rather than some empty promise that nothing bad will ever happen to us, this promise assures us that whatever does happen to us; whatever pain or problems may plague us; whatever fear we may face; whatever sin may assail us; we will never be found defenseless or alone.

For we stand under the protection of God's wings, shaded by God's forgiveness, strengthened by the body and blood which is broken and shed for us.

I would like to close this morning with the following story:

A young farmer tells about the day that the hen house burned down on his grandpa's place just down the road. He arrived just in time to help put out the last of the fire. As he and his grandfather sorted through the wreckage, they came upon one hen lying dead near what had been the door of the hen house.

Her top feathers were singed brown by the fire's heat, her neck limp. The young farmer bent down to pick up the dead hen. But as he did so, he felt movement. The hen's four chicks came scurrying out from beneath her burnt body.

The chicks survived because they were insulated by the shelter of the hen's wings, protected and saved even as she died to protect and save them.

“How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.” Can you see the connection?

This morning, once again, Jesus Christ calls you and me. He calls us to the shelter of his protecting wings. He calls you and me to the safety of his arms stretched out for us on the cross.

He calls us to place our trust in him, no matter what our fears, hurts, or troubles; to trust that his outstretched arms are strong enough, his wings broad enough to keep us safe.

And in the shadow of those wings, we are saved. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.

How many of you know what a fox is? Have any of you ever seen a fox?

Foxes are hunters. They kill other animals for their food. Foxes are also very sneaky. How many of you watch the cartoon “Dora”. There is a sneaky fox on that show that is always trying to steal something. His name is “Swiper”.

Many farmers don’t like foxes, because foxes love to kill chickens. And foxes don’t just kill other animals for food. Sometimes they will get into a chicken house and kill chickens just for the fun of it.

In our Bible story today, there was a man named Herod who was the ruler of the land. Jesus called Herod a fox, probably because he wasn’t a very nice person.

If a fox sneaked into a chicken house and met a mother hen in there with her little chicks, what do you think would happen? Would the mother hen run away from her little chicks so that she wouldn’t get killed by the fox?

No. Even if the hen were very frightened, she would stay to protect her little chicks. If the fox attacked, the hen would spread out her wings, and all the chicks would run to her and hide under her wings. Then the hen would peck at the fox with her sharp beak, trying to get it to leave them alone. The mother hen never leaves her chicks, even if it means that she might be killed.

Jesus says that he is like a mother hen. What do you think he means? How is Jesus like a mother hen? How can Jesus protect us from danger?

Just like the mother hen, Jesus was willing to die so that we might have life. When Jesus died on the cross, he died for the wrong things that we do, so that we don’t have to. Jesus covers us and protects us like a mother hen protects her chicks.

Let us pray...Lord, always keep us safe beside you. Help us never to wander away from you protecting wings.