

The Second Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2010
Luke 13:31-35
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If you were an animal, what would you be?

If you were an animal, what would you be? If you don't know, go on the internet and there are many inventories that will give you an answer.

So that's what I did. I enjoy personality tests, after all. After answering about eight questions, I get my results: a mouse. A mouse? I know what questions I should have answered differently. OK, let me take a different one. This one has double the number of questions. It probably will be more accurate. The result: a snake! These online quizzes are useless. But I decide to take another one. This one is even longer and when I get to the end and I have to fill out some registration form to get my results. No way. I'll take just one more. Just one. I get to the end of that one and I'm a: dolphin.

A mouse, a snake, a dolphin. Which will I choose?

If you were an animal, what would you be?

Or, what if God were an animal? The scriptures use all kinds of metaphors and similes to speak of God. Jesus is the lamb of God. And in the Hebrew scriptures, God is like a mother bird, offering shelter under her wings.

This Sunday's gospel uses two animals to contrast Herod and Jesus: a chicken and a fox.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he meets his fate. Luke's gospel begins and ends here. Jerusalem is a place rich in history and symbolism. The dwelling place of God, the holy city.

A fox. When the Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him, Jesus calls Herod a fox. Herod, the king, representing worldly authority. Herod, threatened by Jesus, who gives ultimate allegiance not to empire but to God alone. A fox is sly and cunning. Herod has military might, after all. He is the predator, the one with power.

Jesus' heart breaks for the city. For the people who continue to reject the prophets sent to them. Can you hear the lament in his poignant words: O Jerusalem, how I long to gather you in my arms like a hen gathers her brood under her wings.

Jesus, a hen. Not with the beak and spiked feet a rooster has to defend himself. The hen is vulnerable to attack. It seems that her purpose is simply to protect her young. A hen as image for God? Comfort level: high. Popularity level: think again. And level of protection from danger: pray that a fox doesn't get into your henhouse!

We understand what it feels like to be defenseless in a world of threats and danger. The attempted bombing on Christmas day was another reminder of that. It can feel like the world is unsafe, full of predators out to get us. Google "top animals predators" and this is what you get: great white shark, lion, grizzly bear, killer whale, and crocodile.

Jesus as mother hen doesn't exactly fit with our desire for a super-hero God, a super-size God, a mighty God. People expected the Messiah to be the "lion of Judah," the one who would overthrow the political powers that be. But instead we have a lamb who dies. And a hen who puts herself at risk to save her young.

We make fun of chickens. And now Jesus compares himself to an animal that clucks and broods, and is so ... vulnerable to attack. Where will this Lenten journey take us?

Speaking of animals, there will be others along the way. At the great Vigil on Easter Eve we will tell the story of God creating the heavens and the earth, and all the animals. We will tell the story of Noah and the ark, the animals going inside two by two. Sometimes the season of Lent is described as an ark as we journey for forty days and forty nights toward Easter.

And if Lent is a time for self-reflection, questions like “if you were an animal, what would you be” could be a playful start. Or perhaps, we as a community might ask: How do we face the vulnerabilities and limitations of our lives? How do we react to the prophets sent to us? How are we like predators and in ways do we feel defenseless? And where do we place our ultimate loyalty and trust? In the fox? In Herod and the power of the empire? Or in the hen?

Like the city Jerusalem rejecting the prophets sent to her, we also turn our eyes away from the holy in our midst. Who wants a hen for a God anyway? Why can't God stop the suffering and violence in the world? There is so much to brood over. Life can seem so difficult, so complicated, so unfair. Maybe it's easier to blame God for it all. Or to become a fox, sly and cunning. Or become a predator, devouring everything and everyone in our way.

If Jesus were an animal, what would he be? We sing it every week: Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.

But today, God as a bird, spreading her wings over us for refuge. Jesus as a mother hen, offering the chicks warmth and protection. When danger comes, watch the hen squawk to warn her young. Though she seems defenseless, watch her fluff herself up to scare off the enemy. And watch her spread her wings wide so that the chicks scamper beneath them and cuddle up to her warm body.

If the church were an animal, what could we be? Fierce like a lion? Swift like a gazelle? Strong like an ox?

What if the church were a mother hen? This our henhouse. With nests for nurture. And wings! Not just to fly, but to spread over the poor and the needy. Over newborns and children. Over strangers and seekers. Over everyone, really. For under these wings, under the love of Christ, is warmth. Protection. Refuge.