

Luke 13:31-35

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.' Jesus said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem." 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! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

Mission and the Mama Hen
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Redwoods Presbyterian Church, Larkspur, CA
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There's a song that has sky-rocketed on the charts of the top-10 hits around the world – it's reached #1 in the US, #3 in Australia and Canada, #4 in Belgium, Czech Republic, and Israel, #7 in Finland, #10 in Switzerland, (and, Gabriele, it's #22 in Germany). The song, released by an American alternative hip-hop band called "Twenty-One Pilots," focuses on nostalgia for childhood and the pressures of adulthood. I first heard it a couple of weeks ago when I was driving in the car on a road trip with my son and I was completely mesmerized by the music and the lyrics. *I was told when I got older all my fears would shrink, but now I'm insecure and I care what people think...* it starts off. And then the chorus: *Wish we could turn back time, to the good-old days, when our mama sang us to sleep but now we're stressed out.*

I was so obsessed with the song that I googled it and watched the music video. It starts with the singer riding an adult-sized big-wheel down the middle of a street in what I learned was his home-town in Ohio. He rides to his friend's house and knocks on the door, and they perform a secret handshake and then go and record the song in his bedroom. Later in the video and the song, there's a row of parents and others, assumingly well-intentioned, yelling as the singer lays resting on a couch, "Wake up! You need to make money!" It is such a sad and poignant commentary on our culture and the longing for something – for security and peace. The song is called "Stressed Out," and I think it represents – well, I was going to say the youth of Marin County -- but based on the song's popularity around the developed world, I think it speaks to a more pervasive global phenomenon. Youth are fearful and insecure, worried that they're not going to be able to make it in today's competitive world. And it's no wonder, based on the messages they receive from their elders.

In the gospel passage today, some Pharisees have come to Jesus to warn him to leave the Galilee area because Herod wants to kill him. It has that same panicked and judgmental tone as, “Wake up, you need to make money,” – “Get out! Herod’s gonna kill ya!” The Pharisees are the religious leaders and it’s interesting that they seem to want to “help” Jesus because in most other accounts, they are trying to snag him, trick him, or have him killed themselves. If you’ve seen the movie, “The Big Short,” it reminds me a bit of this. You can’t always tell who are the good guys and who are the bad guys. Like the row of good-hearted adults in the video, “Wake up! You need to make money!” Is that helpful?

The Pharisees are threatened by Jesus’ ministry, because he continually calls them out on their behavior, which begins and ends with outward appearances. In the parallel passage to the one read today in Matthew 23, just beforehand Jesus says to the religious leaders, “So on the outside you look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” Like many prophets before him, these messages are difficult for people to hear because they upset the status quo and the power structures that are in place. Jewish history recounts that these truth-telling prophets end up being killed, stoned to death, ironically, in Jerusalem, the holy city, where Jesus is now headed.

The lyrics of the song and the message of the Pharisees in the reading today both express this preoccupation with status and power, and the conventional drive to worldly success at any cost. It is to say, stop what you are doing, the way you are going, your non-conformist ways, to fit within the world’s established structures. It’s challenging to go against the grain of what is acceptable, even if what is acceptable is unethical, unhealthy or corrupt.

There is so much pressure for worldly success in our culture, and I’ll speak to our immediate culture here in Marin. “Wake up, you need to make money,” says it all. College students pick majors based on the income associated with it. Not that this is altogether wrong, as there is certainly a practical aspect to survival. But when it is the sole focus, if the purpose of a career is only to make money, and lots of it, as much as possible, disregarding whatever contribution it makes to society, or whether it connects to one’s own sense of vocation or talents... it’s disturbing because I think at some point there must be an emptiness with that.

It was on the trip with my son where I first heard that song that I was informed about the death of a beloved 19 year-old young man in Mill Valley, our friend, named Gabe. It has shocked the community. As people began assembling together to support the grieving family, one person stood out and took charge immediately. This was the boy’s best friend, Sarah. Sarah started an online fund two days after his death to help raise money for his memorial, with extra proceeds going towards the foundation in his name, Gabriel’s Foundation, which his parents started, to help families struggling with addicted children. Sarah has taken on a lot. I was on a conference call with her from her college at UCLA and she was also taking on the invitations to the Celebration of Life and the 5-day Shiva, a Jewish tradition of

opening up the home of the bereaved to friends and family following the death of a loved one. Sarah took on organizing these events and compiled the lists of hundreds and hundreds of invites remotely from college. When I spoke to people about her amazing organizational skills and willingness to help, some expressed reticence and concern, stating that she needs to focus on her studies. I started to feel, too, that Sarah was taking on too much.

So I was surprised when I saw her in person a couple of days later, she had flown in from LA to attend a small local gathering to help plan the events for Gabe. Sarah sat on a stool with her laptop on her lap, and as people made suggestions Sarah would type and say, "Ok! Done! What's next?" She took charge and organized us. I gave her a hug and said I was sorry if she was taking on too much, that people were concerned that it might negatively impact her progress at school. "They don't understand," she said. "I *have* to do this. This was my best friend. Nothing else is more important right now," and she got right back to typing on her computer. This is the tone that Jesus has in the reading today, this is his response to the panicked Pharisees. It doesn't matter if someone's trying to kill me, I have work to do.

To lay down one's life for one's friends, isn't that what Jesus commanded us? When I saw the conviction in Sarah's demeanor, I knew there was no stopping her. Nothing, not the threat of being put on Academic Probation or being kicked out of college, nothing would stop her. She is on a mission. It's clear that Sarah's work on behalf of Gabe is clearly part of her path, and will certainly influence whatever major or career she chooses. Those concerned for her future know this deep down, they know how special she is, and yet the world still tempts us to believe there is one narrow way to success. That if we don't stay on track or on course... well, what? That we will be complete failures?

Jesus mission isn't thwarted by the threat of being killed by Herod. He started his ministry with reading the scroll from Isaiah: the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, anointing me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and the receiving of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. This is his mission. Nothing is going to stop him. Not the threat of death, not death itself.

Tell that fox, Jesus says, tell Herod that fox, that the mama hen is busy gathering, healing, curing and comforting her chicks. Jesus is not afraid, because he is willing to be nestled under the protective wings of God, where nothing can harm him. Jesus offers to be this mama hen for us. And I say mama hen, because mother hen has negative connotations, like fussing, nit-picking, criticizing. Mama hen is nurturing, Mama hen is the one that wants to gather and protect us so that we may flourish, so that our God-given gifts may be used in service to others.

There is a story retold by a woman named Jacqueline on the website Deep Roots at Home. "There was a forest fire that had been brought under control, and the group

of firefighters were working back through the devastation making sure all the hot spots had been extinguished. As they marched across the blackened landscape between the wisps of smoke still rising from the smoldering remains, a large lump on the trail caught a firefighter's eye. As he got closer he noticed it was the charred remains of a bird that had burned nearly half way through. Since birds can so easily fly away from the approaching flames, the firefighter wondered what must have been wrong with this bird that it could not escape. Had it been sick or injured? Arriving at the carcass, he pushed it aside and as he did so, four little chicks flailed in the dust and ash then scurried away down the hillside. The bulk of the mother's body had covered them from the searing flames. Though the heat was enough to consume her, it allowed her babies to find safety underneath. In the face of the rising flames, she had stayed with her young. Her dead carcass and her fleeing chicks told the story well enough—she gave the ultimate sacrifice to save her young. The hen in the story was the only chance those chicks had for safety; she, being willing to spare her own life, had gathered them up under her wings to herself.

Jacqueline says she has observed in her own free-range chickens, that *not all chicks run to their mothers in time of danger*. Some are either paralyzed in panic or try to find a way to save themselves; they get devoured. *The mother hen cannot run around gathering them all individually. They have to come to her*. She says that all of the chicks that ever survived the cats at the farm stayed close to their mother. They could be 'cut off' from the brood (by two cats working together) if they wandered, but if they stayed close by, all they had to do was run under the mother's wings and let her cover them, because the cats never messed with the hen.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem," Jesus laments, "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, and you were not willing."

People have gathered together under the wings of God to mourn the loss of a beautiful child. Night after night, people have gathered at Gabe's home for Shiva, sharing stories, memories, condolences with his parents and with one another. This Jewish tradition of Shiva recognizes that we are not meant to go it alone. We are meant to be there for one another, holding one another up in our despair, clinging to one another in love and praying together in hope, as we do here each week in this church. It is this willingness to show up -- with all our frailties and vulnerability exposed, seeking shelter under the protective wings of God -- that is ultimately going to save us.

Whatever it is that is causing us stress today, whatever illness, worry, chaos or fear that may be consuming us today, rest assured that God is in the midst of it all. We need only seek out the mama hen and ask for guidance, and she'll gather us up, under her soft, loving feathers.

Sarah is not concerned with the world's description and dictation of who, how, when or where she should love. Her love has no boundaries. Like Jesus, she is not going to cave in to the fears or threats that will try to stop her on her path to gathering and healing others. Like God, she is excluding no one.

Not everyone is called to do what Sarah is doing, Sarah possesses the unique gifts that make her well-suited for it and that's why God called Sarah. And Sarah is answering the call. What is it that God is calling you to do today? Is it to take more time for yourself, perhaps to take an art class, or a dance class? or to reach out to a neighbor or family member and apologize for a past offense, or perhaps forgive a past offense done to you? What is God calling you to do today that will release you from fear and move you to freedom? There is nothing you need to do, other than answer the call, and say yes. God will empower you through the Holy Spirit to do whatever else needs to be done. Will you say Yes? This is how *we can turn back time, to the good-old days, when our mama sang us to sleep and we are with her now.*