

Luke 13:31-35
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Mother Hens and Holy Strollers

Jesus has covered a tremendous amount of ground since last week. He is fully on his way to Jerusalem, on a collision course with the powers that be. Throughout his journey, Jesus has discussions and heated exchanges with the Pharisees, who are often labeled as bad guys, as the ones who are anti-Jesus and radically opposed to all that he comes to usher in. Luke's account of the Pharisees is more complex than that, however, because human beings on the whole are more complex than that. Just as it is wrong to decide that our contemporary neighbors in a specific group are all evil or all good, Luke makes it clear that the Pharisees are a complicated bunch, too. True, they debate Jesus frequently about matters of practice and interpretation. They also sit at table with him and invite him into their homes. Scholars point out that Jesus is right at home in the Pharisaic tradition because of his time teaching in the synagogues and his deep love for scripture—meaning the Old Testament, of course—and his devotion to all that life within the covenant community entails. Pharisees will be among the members of the earliest church in the book of Acts. So when the Pharisees pull Jesus aside to warn him about Herod, we have every reason to believe that they are genuinely concerned. Their concern may extend to their own safety as well, but it does seem clear that they are anxious about Jesus' insistence on drawing Herod's attention, as well as his wrath. He has already had John the Baptist killed. Doing away with Jesus and his trouble-making ways would be a logical next step. It makes sense that the Pharisees would prefer that Jesus not rock the boat or rattle Herod's cage. It also makes sense that if Jesus insists on doing what he's doing, they would prefer that he do it elsewhere.

When I was a junior in college, my roommate and I were hall counselors for about 30 first year students. They were brilliant, fun, talented, and kind, and as new college students, they were also just a

bit stressed out much of the time—about love, classes, homesickness, friends, and all that comes with being a first year in college—or at any age, really. We were just getting our feet under us, and then we were told that a hurricane was headed our way. As you know, Hugo blew into Charleston and decided to make his way toward Charlotte, as well as Davidson and Concord, and I kicked into full Mother Hen mode. As tropical force winds began to batter the old walls of our dorm, at least a few of these conscientious students stressed over whether they would have an Econ 101 exam the next day. Meanwhile two prospective students from Charleston were worrying about their families' safety back home. I have memories of fluttering from one room to the next, calming nerves and soothing worries, all while knowing there was only so much I could do about all that was heading our way. We woke up the next morning to the eerie quiet that follows a storm like Hugo. Massive trees were toppled all over campus. Power was out, and phone lines were down. The dean of students gathered the hall counselors and RAs that afternoon and told us to send home as many of our students as we could. Tending to those first years without food, phones, or electricity was more than even the wisest 20-year-old mother hens could handle. And honestly, we were in need of a bit of mother-hen-ing ourselves.

Jesus knows what is headed his way, or more accurately, what he is heading toward. Having set his face for Jerusalem in chapter nine, he knows that he is walking into a conflict that will result in suffering and even death. And yet, he keeps going. He is determined to keep going. There are chicks to gather, children of God to draw close and save. He cannot make them—or us—take shelter under his wings, but he can try. And even when they or we refuse his protection and reject his saving ways, he keeps coming, keeps trying no matter how menacing the fox may be. Herod wants or desires to kill Jesus, to stop him just as he stopped John. Jesus on the other hand wants and desires to save every last peep from the fox's wily ways.¹ He moves with single-minded determination toward the center of

¹ Thanks to the Rev. Dr. Dan Lewis for this insight in his paper for The Well, 2010.

power to do everything in his power to save God's beloved children from all that would devour and destroy them. And he grieves when his beloved brood scurries away. It breaks his heart.

Of all of the heartbreaking images that we have seen coming out of the Ukrainian crisis, one of the most holy and haunting is one of strollers parked at train stations in Poland and elsewhere. As journalist Monica Hesse writes:

The strollers on the train platforms in Poland are needed because Ukrainian mothers arrived in Poland with only the clothes on their backs and the children in their arms. The trains or buses that evacuated them were too crowded for these women to bring their own strollers, perhaps, or maybe the women were forced to leave too quickly to have time to fetch them.

Or maybe it's this: If you are a Ukrainian mother, maybe when an explosive device turns your neighborhood into rubble, when you see your fellow citizens fall in the street, when you learn exactly what munitions explosions smell like — maybe when that happens, your instinct is to grab your baby and hold him close to your own body as you run for your life, not to push him away in a pram.²

These women do not wear suits of armor. Their bodies and their ferocious love for their children are all they wield in an effort to save their children's lives.

The same can be said of Jesus, of course. He does not march into Jerusalem on a war horse with battalions of soldiers. Instead in a matter of weeks he will ride into Jerusalem on a donkey amidst cheers from waiting crowds. Those cheers will swiftly switch to chants calling for his crucifixion. Like those mothers in Ukraine and others in Sudan, Colombia, Haiti, and countless other places ripped apart by war and violence, Jesus offers his body to save God's children, hoping to shield them and to save their lives by sacrificing his. When they refuse his protection, when we insist on going our own way, his heart is

² Monica Hesse, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2022/03/09/ukraine-refugee-mother-strollers/>

broken. Still, he refuses to take up arms as he insists on offering his heart and his hope to all, and he asks his church—his body—to do the same.

I confess that I would rather turn off the news and tune out the heartbreak. And while I do believe we have to find a way to occasionally step away from the horrors that are available 24 hours a day and 7 days a week, as members of Christ's body, I also believe we are called to consider what breaks God's heart across the globe and in our little corner of that globe. While I am sure that God weeps over the strife that persists in Jerusalem today, I also suspect that the Mother Hen-like God we meet in Jesus Christ also weeps over hungry children, frightened mothers, and embattled fathers two blocks away and in every neighborhood on every continent. And I confess that I often feel helpless about my ability to do anything to help. I admire those who have packed their bags and headed to the front lines, the ones who go to fight and the ones who go to help and the ones who go to report on what life looks like when the tanks are about to roll into town. And yet I don't think I'd be much help in Ukraine. There is a limit to my mother-hen-ing talents.

That's where the images of strollers on train platforms give me hope. Those Polish mothers are helping how they can right where they are. We the church are created and called to be Christ's body in and for the entire world. We are created and called to be a body that continually asks and wonders what breaks God's heart right here and right now. We have been created, welcomed, tucked in, and saved by this ferociously loving and protective, mother-hen-like God. In turn we—as Christ's body—offer shelter, protect the vulnerable, and save lives where and when we can. In the face of division, hatred, greed, suspicion, and despair—every fox that threatens God's beloved brood, Christ gives us the creative courage to listen to those who suffer injustice, to feed those who are hungry, to advocate for those who struggle with addiction and mental illness, to work to put a roof over every head, and to park strollers on train platforms. By the grace of God, we know what it means to be protected and saved, and

we can imagine what it is to want to protect the little ones, much like those mothers in Poland. We know what it is to want to be able to do something to offer hope when things seem hopeless and to offer even a little help to those whose lives are so hard, because we have received such hope and help ourselves. In the words of Ms. Hesse:

[The women in Poland] were ... thinking about the way that a baby can make a bed out of a stroller. They were thinking about the way that the whirring motion of a moving stroller can make a baby stop crying, and make her head tilt heavy against the waterproof nylon until she falls asleep and her breath comes out whisper-soft. They were thinking about the mothers of Ukraine. The fact that they have traveled so far, and their children are so heavy, and their arms are so tired.³

It is such a simple and yet powerful act. These women have shown deep compassion for people whose names they will likely never know. They have found a creative and faithful way to offer hope, comfort, and a small bit of shelter in the midst of a scary and uncertain world. And I believe their efforts might just have made a weeping Christ smile. He, too, has traveled far, and tired as he may be, he has many miles yet to go as he makes his way toward Jerusalem. As he goes, Jesus will persist in spreading his wings to make room for every last little weary one to find shelter and rest, tucked close to him, the very One who offers his body to save their lives and ours.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

³ Hesse