

There are animals in our text for today. A fox and a hen. Jesus calls Herod a fox, and He refers to Himself as a mother hen. You've heard the saying about a fox in a chicken coop. Not a good day for the chickens when that happens. Yet a number of years ago there was a story that came out about a fox that got into a chicken coop over in France, and it was a bad day for the fox. The mother hens, in protecting their baby chicks, pecked the fox to death.

There is no safer place for a baby chick to be than under the wings of its mother. But apart from its mother, a baby chick is a meal waiting for a hungry predator.

Jesus, here, calls Herod a fox. And although Scripture does not refer to the devil in this way, the word can be applied to him also. He is clever, and he is a hungry predator. And you, my friends, dare I say it? You are a meal. St. Peter does call the devil a hungry lion seeking someone to devour. We can call him a fox, a lion, or a serpent. But whatever animal we choose, the devil is a predator with an insatiable appetite.

Now when I say that you are a meal, I mean that in this sense, that the devilish predator sees you as a meal; as someone he wants to devour. But he cannot, because you are safe under the wings of your mother hen.

It was not this way for the people of Jerusalem. Jesus agonizes over them. "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,*" He cries, "*the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!*"

These words are a scathing indictment of the city. We have cities that are known for their murders. One of these is very close to us. But Jerusalem stands head and shoulders above them all. Her people do not just commit murder. They murder those whom God sends to her. Prophet after prophet was killed in Jerusalem. Stephen, the first martyr, would be stoned there. Even God Himself would be murdered on a cross just outside her walls.

What can be done for such a city? Here is what Jesus does; what He has been doing all along. He opens His arms to her. He spreads out His wings, like a mother hen, and calls to the people of Jerusalem to come and be gathered to Him where they would be kept safe.

And this, right here, is why He agonizes over the city. Murdering all those prophets was terrible. Stoning and killing Stephen, along with the apostles, would be horrible. Even putting Him to death on a cross would be the greatest and most evil murder of them all. But all of this is not as agonizing to Jesus as their refusal to be gathered together under His loving and protecting embrace.

My friends, there is a clear warning here, yet there is also assuring comfort. Here is what I mean. We tend to rank sins. Everyone does. Even our court system does, and should. Murder is much worse than shoplifting. Trespassing is not as bad as assault. We think we know which sins are worse than other sins. But what about God? How do sins rank with Him?

For Him, the worst thing a person can do is not to steal, lie, or murder. The worse thing is to refuse to come to Jesus. To sin against the Gospel is worse than any sin against the Law. There is forgiveness for any and every sin against the Law. But to sin against the Gospel is to reject forgiveness, to reject Jesus.

This is why He agonizes, not over the fact that Jerusalem is a city that killed the prophets, as bad as that was. It's their refusal to be gathered together like baby chicks under the wings of their mother hen that causes Him the greatest agony.

Here is the warning, therefore. Never, never ever stop being faithfully gathered here where your mother hen, Jesus, opens His wings to you. To refuse to come here to where Jesus calls you, where He shelters you from the hungry predator, and where He nourishes you with His gifts of grace, is to refuse Jesus. And that is when you do, in fact, become a meal.

Yet here is sweet assurance for you. Whatever sins you have done, any and all sins against the Law, from the least in your eyes to the worst, you bring your sins here to Jesus, and friend, He forgives you. He forgives you for all of them.

And hear this sweet comfort as well. Even if, in the past, you have refused Jesus, refused to be gathered here under His wings, He does not refuse you. He continues to call to you. He spread out His wings on the cross for you. There He shed His blood for your sins. Not one of you is left out of His bloody embrace. There is hope for all of you. You have a mother hen. His name is Jesus. And under the shelter of His wings, nothing can harm you.

Let me conclude with this true story. A farmer had a chicken coop which sadly burned to the ground. Poking through the ashes, he saw a mother hen burned to a crisp. He was curious why she did not flee the fire. Picking her up, he saw the reason. There were all her baby chicks alive and well. She gave her life up for them being, for them, the one safe place.

This is what Jesus did for you. And this is why you love Him, and why you gather here under His wings. Amen.