

Beneath the Shelter of Your Wing
Luke 13: 1-9; 31-35
March 12, 2017
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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Does anybody else have a system that just can't quite fathom what on earth is happening with the weather this winter? For the first time in 146 years, Chicagoland had no measurable snow in January or February. Record high days have been experienced throughout these last couple of months, with only three days in February where the temperature did not break out of the 20s. And the result is that the bushes and trees put out their buds. On my street there at least 200 day lilies that are about four inches tall; the tulips at the Harrison Street entrance are a good five inches out of the ground; and two days ago, it went down to 19 degrees! In the next 48 hours we are expected to get up to six inches of snow and a few more days in the 20s.

Things are just weird. And it's not just here. Burlington Vermont broke their all-time winter high temperature record by four degrees last month. The National Weather Service reports more than a thousand weather records were broken in the Eastern half of the country so far this winter. It's enough to make a gardener panic. Will the freeze kill the plants that have come up already? Will the growing season for flower and vegetable gardens be trashed for the year? Probably not, but there is so much uncertainty and things are unsettled.

Sound familiar? If our weird weather is not an anomaly and is a part of some greater process of climate change, imagine how folks in the political, social and economic arenas are feeling right now. The European Union is facing structural challenges they have never known; the reverberations of the Arab Spring more than half a decade ago are still being felt in the Middle East; famine, drought and political unrest have made Africa more unstable than it's been in decades. And then, there is our own country — where, to be honest, it's become exhausting to read the news every morning. Is the world coming to an end? Probably not, but there is so much uncertainty and things are unsettled.

The disciples who gathered around Jesus in Chapter 13 of Luke can relate. Weird and terrible things have been happening. The cruel Roman governor has engaged in unspeakable cruelties, and one of the towers of the wall around Jerusalem has collapsed killing many. Also, the people are worried, and frightened and speculating. Surely, they say, these things are happening because those people — those killed by the despot and those lost in a tragic accident — must have done something terribly wrong for God to let this happen or, even worse, to make this happen to them.

And, into this place of deep anxiety, Jesus steps and proves that he didn't take pastoral care at the same seminary I did. He doesn't seek to comfort them but instead to teach them. "Do you think they are worse than you?" he asks. "They surely are not. If the wages of sin are death, then death awaits all of us," he tells them.

But then he does that infuriating thing that Jesus is wont to do in Luke. He tells them a story, a parable about a fig tree that won't bear fruit. Jesus listeners will instantly start shaking their heads. They've heard this story before. Isaiah told it; John the Baptist referred to it all the time. The axe is lying ready; the owner of the orchard or vineyard (or whatever metaphor Jesus wants to use today) is waiting to chop down the tree if it doesn't bear fruit.

But Jesus confounds their expectations by introducing a new character to the story. In the ancient tellings of similar parables, it was assumed that God was the landowner demanding the trees bear fruit or they would be so much kindling. But we are in Luke, a gospel where landowners and the leisure class are not typically depicted as heroic, and certainly not divine.

Today, into the midst of the chaos of the orchard, Jesus introduces a gardener, a gardener who is not interested in destroying unproductive trees but in nurturing them, feeding them, getting down to the roots to feed them and in creating space for growth and fruit to develop. And this gardener defies the death-seeing landowner with a request for time — let me see what I can do, what this little tree and I can do together, and then you can think about cutting it down next year.

One gets the impression that this gardener might say the same thing next year — give me another year; growth is happening; fruit will come; let's not talk about the axe until next season, and the next season, and the next season. And, if you are the tree, this gardener, whom my friend and Well colleague, Joe Clifford of Meyers Park Presbyterian in Charlotte, North Carolina, calls the Plucky Gardner, is a great friend and protector.

Let's remember that Jesus still has his face set on Jerusalem. He knows that his time with the people has a shortening time limit. And I want to suggest that he needs them to understand God and Jesus' own ministry in a different way than they have before. They assume God is angry; they equate the apocalyptic actions of God with death. And Jesus needs to prepare them for seeing the world in a different way, for seeing the God they worship — that we worship — in a different way.

The god who uses Pilate to torture and kill, the god who brings towers down on men, women and children in the marketplace is not the God from whom Jesus comes. And you can almost feel his need to make them see things in a new way. The God he wants them to worship, to turn to is the Plucky Gardener who may have high expectations, but who is not standing idly by with the axe. Jesus wants them to see the God who is down in the dirt, spreading the manure and coaxing the roots to grow strong so the tree bears fruit and thrives.

Maybe it's that desire for them to see and understand God differently that motivates Jesus — in the second passage today, a passage typically called the lament over Jerusalem — to lift up another God metaphor from the Old Testament, one not used very often to speak of God's loving care: "How often have I desired to gather your children together the way a hen gathers her own brood under her wings."

Let's be clear, in the midst of the very first specific warning that the powers that be in Jerusalem — specifically the Hebrew vassal king Herod — want to kill him, Jesus, in a defiant response that is much stronger than the gardener's admonition to the landowner, says NOT TODAY HEROD. I have healing and teaching to do. And then he makes that reference to the Mother Hen. Back in Deuteronomy, God is referred to as a Mother Eagle, hovering over and protecting her young (Deut. 32:11-12). And in Hosea, God is a mother bear, attacking those who attack her children (Hos. 13:8). But Jesus doesn't choose some wild creature to describe the way he seeks to love even the people who hate him. He chooses a domestic, simple image, the Mother Hen protecting her young.

So the protective mother image of God — one the church has too long neglected — is, in the midst of talk of death, a simple statement of a desire to love and protect. But there is something unique about this image that anyone who has ever had chickens and chicks will know: The Mother Hen can only protect the chicks that draw near to her. Yes, in the context of this chapter, where repentance is so central, we hear Jesus speak of a desire to love and care for the people in a way that reminds them they need to respond, like the fledglings they are, like we all are. They have to come when the hen calls and be taken under her wings. They have to do something to participate in their own preservation.

It's an image I actually like for repentance — this word that we in the progressive church are so discomforted by. Maybe this story helps us to see that repentance is surrendering the action of running off in every direction that we want. Repentance is looking up — from pecking the ground or chasing that earthworm or just testing the boundaries of this coop we call life— looking up and, when we see ourselves alone, unprotected, at the mercy of the hawks of our day, looking up and remembering to turn around — that's literally what repentance means in the Greek, to turn around — and see the mother hen there, the source of our life and protection. She is just waiting to take us under her wing.

Maybe our 21st century take-away is not that different than the one Jesus intended for the disciples. He is inviting us to recognize that we need to turn and draw near, and to remember that even if — like Jesus with his face set toward Jerusalem — the mother hen is on the move, the chicks can still take refuge under her wings.

Next week Jessica will talk about what God does for those who continue to stray, those who are lost. But today we are invited to remember that this life, when we best live it, is not about following our own noses into a world beset by troubles, but it's about always remembering not to stray too far from the relative safety we can find beneath the wings of the gracing, challenging love of God. It turns out that our Plucky Gardner is also our mother hen.

So what does it look like? In the novel, now about to be a big pre-Easter movie release of *The Shack*, the protagonist, Mack, whose life has been torn apart by tragedy, is invited to encounter God in a new way — particularly in relation to the aspect of God called Papa. It probably gives you a picture of how radical this encounter is for him when I tell you that Papa in the movie is played by Octavia Spencer, the Oscar-winning African American actress from *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*. Without giving too much away, Papa is a maternal figure who invites Mack to see faith not as joining a religion because religion is about answers. Instead, it is about offering himself in relationship to these various

manifestations of God, including Jesus, who is depicted in part as of all things — a Gardener.

Now I have to be honest, I haven't seen the movie and the book has some theology that I'm not terribly comfortable with, but I do love those images.

But what does offering ourselves in relationship to God mean? What does keeping in view of the Mother Hen mean for you and for me? What does collaborating with the Plucky Gardener look like for you and me as we try to live each day? We'd like to think that the church is the hands and feet of Christ in the world today. We'd say, too, that scripture speaks with his voice, even though it's through the sometimes confusing human writers.

What if drawing together in service in his name to the poor and the oppressed is keeping the hen in view? What if delving into scripture is letting the gardener feed our roots, even if sometimes we get the uncomfortable whiff of manure in the process? What if repentance is surrendering our need to decide that we control the coop or get to treat it without respect or appreciation? What if drawing near to love where we find it is seeking our protection or our nurturing under God's wings?

The world, like the weather, can be a bit crazy. Individual lives can get crazy too. But this crazy carpenter, headed to a showdown in Jerusalem, wants us to remember that we not only can't do this on our own, but we don't have to.

The Plucky Gardner, the Mother Hen, the love of God. Thanks be to God.