

## The fox and the hen

### A sermon on Luke 13:31–35

Leonard Beechy

**A**t that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He 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 outside of 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.’” (Luke 13:31–35)

When I was a little boy growing up on the farm, one of my favorite places to play was on the roof of what we called the chicken house. The roof was low and round, so in my play it served sometimes as the back of an elephant when I was playing Tarzan and sometimes as a hill that had to be defended from marauding neighbor boys. It struck me one day while I was playing there that we always called it the chicken house, but there were never any chickens in it. I asked my mother about this, and she told me the story. It seems that when my family moved to this farm just before I was born, one of the first things my father did was to buy a bunch of chicks and put them in the chicken house. The next morning, all the chicks were dead. They had been killed by some predator or other. Some suspected rats. I know that I once surprised a fox in the

woods near our house. Whatever the culprit, our chicken house never housed another chicken. In my mind it became a monument to the essential vulnerability of chicken life, of all life, to the nameless forces of death that work in the night. As for my father, he was through with chickens. In the eternal struggle between chicken and fox, his money was forever after on the fox.

Our text from Luke is, of course, the story of a fox and a hen. “That fox” is the very disrespectful way by which Jesus refers to the tetrarch of Galilee, Herod Antipas. The Pharisees, of all people, had come to Jesus to warn him to flee because Herod wanted to kill him. With startling sarcasm, Jesus replies, in effect, “Go tell Herod to get in line. There is machinery in motion that’s

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bigger than any third-rate political hack. I’ve got a few days’ work to do,” Jesus says, “and I may as well do it on the way to Jerusalem, because that’s the only place for a prophet to die.” But even as he utters the word “Jerusalem,” you can hear Jesus’ voice choking with emotion, all the sarcasm draining away. With open grief he cries out, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem”—You can almost hear David’s heart-broken “Absalom, Absalom”—“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.” Jesus sees an empty chicken house ahead. The passage carried even greater pathos for Luke’s first readers, for by that time Rome’s legions had reduced the city to rubble. Oh, Jerusalem.

One of the best preachers at work today is Barbara Brown Taylor. I want to quote one comment from her on this passage: “If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus’ lament.” Is there anyone here who is not included in that “if”? To love means to expose oneself to heartbreak. We wait in emergency rooms, in restless beds for the sound of the car in the driveway; we hang on the words of one professional or another; we partake of a hundred anxious vigils, any one of which could end in the most heart-rending grief. The dark forces of violence, diseases of body and spirit, all lurk like

foxes in the night. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! How I have desired to gather your children! We love and cannot protect.

What will we do? From the beginning of the service this morning we have been invited to come home to the shelter of God's wings. It's a rich image, with roots in the Psalms as well as in our story in Luke. But it raises a question that I would like to face directly and honestly this morning. The question is, how safe is it here under God's wings? What kind of shelter are we offered here?

This question was posed to me most hauntingly when, just after high school, I read a short story by Mark Twain called "The Mysterious Stranger." The story was written very late in Twain's life, after he had been ravaged by grief after grief as his daughters, his wife, and his closest friends all died within a horrible few years. Twain was furious at life and at God, and in his story, a stranger, a stand-in for Satan, comes to town and instructs a group of children on the utter meaninglessness of life and of individual lives. "But the Bible says," one girl protests, "that God sees the sparrow fall from the nest." The stranger replies, "But it falls just the same, doesn't it?"

The stranger's question bothered me so much that, even though I hadn't read it in thirty years, when I looked for the

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passage this week I knew right where to find it. Reading again, though, I was relieved to find that the passage had lost most of its power. Thirty years of living had convinced me of the reality of the shelter of God. In fact, life in the shelter of God's wings is the thing that in all the world is most real to me. What we find there is not exactly safety, for love is never safe. What do we find in the shelter of God's wings?

In the first place, we find that we are not alone. My principal said at a faculty meeting once that everyone has a private hell. The thing is that when a private hell is shared, it is no longer private, and it is no longer hell. For hell is by definition eternal and without hope, and suffering that is shared is neither of these.

Second, in the shelter of God's wings, we find possibilities that are not available anywhere else. There is the possibility of the

miraculous. I am not one who believes that the miraculous is something we can expect or demand or claim, but neither should we cease to pray for it nor cease to watch for it. History, ancient and modern, is too full of testimony that this world is not a closed system, that into the patterns of cause and effect sometimes come wonders that are inexplicable outside the realm of God's shelter. Besides the possibility of the miraculous, there is also the possibility of meaning. Now, I am not among those who believe that all

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suffering is redemptive, or that it is all designed for our good. One of my central theological tenets is a paraphrase of the bumper sticker: "Stuff happens." But one of the rules of the shelter is that suffering does sometimes redeem us, teach us, refine us.

We had a good conversation with our daughter Mary one time this week, reflecting on the two-year ordeal with her health. I told her that the theme of our services during Lent this year, "Coming Home," would have been

very tough for me last year when she was in exile in Ohio because of her allergies. She surprised us, though, by saying that, if she had the power to go back and change the last two years and delete the medical problems, she's not at all certain that she would. What she gained in relationship with her parents, what she learned about herself, what she learned not to fear—these are not things that she would want to do without. Within the shelter of God's wings, we sometimes find that our suffering offers us wisdom.

Finally, we find that when we enter the shelter of God's wings, we enroll in a school of love. It is a risky and painful kind of love, for our teacher and protector assumes the most vulnerable posture in the world: her wings spread over us, her breast exposed. The fox will have to kill her to get to us. And, of course, he does. The fox strikes, the hen is killed, the chicks scatter. Some of the chicks decide they'd prefer to be under the protection of a fox than of a hen, and who can blame them?

But the story takes a surprising turn. It turns out that this hen-love, the kind that puts its body between the fox and the chicks, is the very force in all the universe capable of defeating death, of exposing it as the temporary, third-rate power that it is. On the

other side of death, the wings spread for the entire world. The voice of Jesus calls to us, urging us into the shelter of God's wings. We can go there now; we can stay there the rest of our lives. It isn't exactly a safe place. We too will be asked to spread our wings in love. In doing so, we will expose our own vitals. But we will also know the kind of love that is eternal, that defeats those unnamed powers of death that work at night. And Jesus, whose voice calls to us, will never, ever relinquish the risk of loving us. He'd rather die.

### **About the author**

Leonard Beechy is a member of Eighth Street Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana, where he gave this sermon on March 11, 2001. He is a teacher of high school English, a writer of adult Bible study materials for Faith and Life Resources, a member of a trio of tenors known as the Schmaltzentrubers, and the reigning over-50 tennis champion of Goshen. He and Sharon (Schrock) are the parents of two adult daughters.