

Open my lips, O Lord, that my mouth may proclaim your praise! I speak to you in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. *Amen.*

In today's gospel lesson, there's something unusual, something we don't usually see or hear about. Did you notice that at the very beginning of the passage, the Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here for Herod wants to kill you." For once, the Pharisees are not threatening Jesus or trying to trip him up, but instead are warning him that Herod wants to kill him. Why are they doing this? Their criticisms of him have been ongoing and relentless; no matter what he said or did. There's speculation in modern commentary that between Herod and Jesus, Jesus is the lesser of two evils for the Pharisees. Perhaps that explains it.

But Jesus can't seem to catch a break. Someone is always after him, trying to trap him when his words or actions contradict the orthodoxy of their faith. Jesus doesn't let them stop him. He isn't threatened or even intimidated by the criticism, but seems to become even more dedicated, more committed to the work God has called him to do. His eye is on God and on Jerusalem, for he knows that is the place where he will be killed. When he says "it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem," we might use the word "inappropriate" in place of impossible. Jerusalem, the seat of established, orthodox religion, is the place that opposed Jesus like no other place did. He is a threat to the traditions and conventions of their faith and the power held in those traditions—all because he brings to them a new image of God and of God's grace, an image they cannot embrace because it's unlike anything they've ever known.

On June 18, 2006, at the 75<sup>th</sup> General Convention of The Episcopal Church, the House of Bishops elected the Right Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori to serve as our church's Presiding Bishop. Her election to the highest office in the Episcopal Church was overwhelmingly affirmed by the House of Deputies; that is, the lay people, priests, and deacons who attended that convention after being elected by their own dioceses to conduct the business of the church. Bishop Katharine had been an oceanographer in her secular life, not a doctor of theology, but a doctor of philosophy. She had been elected as the ninth bishop of the Diocese of Nevada only seven years after her ordination to the priesthood. Worst of all, she was a woman, and there had never before been a woman presiding bishop. While some of the folks back home applauded the election, many did not, and so Bishop Katharine began her nine year term as the object of significant criticism which continued until a new presiding bishop was elected last year.

The criticism began, in fact, at the closing Eucharist of the convention that had elected her, when she used the metaphor "Jesus our Mother" in her homily. That phrase, as most of the church now knows, comes from St. Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who died in 1109, and from Julian of Norwich and others around the fourteenth century and before. Listen to these words, this prayer, written by Anselm:

"And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother? Are you not the mother who, like a hen, gathers her chickens under her wings? Truly, Lord, you are a mother; for both they who are in labor and they who are brought forth are accepted by you. You have died more than they, that they may labor to bear. It is by your death that they have been born, for if you had not been in labor, you could not have borne death; and if you had not died, you would not have brought forth. For, longing to bear sons into life, you tasted of death, and by dying you begot them. You did this in your own self, your servants by your commands and help, you as the author, they as ministers. So you, Lord God, are the great mother."

This image of Jesus as Mother is often paired with the gospel passage we've heard today from Luke, in which Jesus laments over Jerusalem and expresses his desire to save the children of Jerusalem just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings to save them from the fox in the hen house. Frankly, the mother hen image hasn't meant much to me. I'm a town girl whose family never had chickens. My country friends didn't know much about chickens, either. Their daddies raised cotton and soy beans. So I had to read a bit to understand why this image of a hen gathering her brood under her wings was so appropriate for Jesus to use when he described his call from God to save the world.

Lutheran professor David Zersen's account of his time in Tanzania helped me understand it.<sup>1</sup> He writes, "each day and night I passed the chicken house on the way to and from the campus where I taught. Regularly, mother hens had new broods of downy chicks that stayed close as they pecked around in the grass. At night, one by one they climbed under her breast and you could see nothing but the hen on guard, her chicks lost somewhere under her feathers. When a fox attacked by night, she could not run away. Not a mother hen! She bared her breast and the fox took her first. In the morning, there was nothing but clusters of feathers here and there, and little chicks running around on their own."

Zersen continues, "The mother hen represents a new form of power and leadership, the one for others, the servant leader, the one whose extravagant love considers the welfare of her own foremost. Thus the means of survival over against the attack of the wily foxes of this world is provided not by retaliation or brute force, but by gathering the innocent, the victims, into a community in which the love of the mother hen lives on even after her death." Ah...now it makes sense to me. We get stuck in trying to see Jesus as a hen; so stuck, in fact, that we can't get past the image. But the image is not the point. Where we should focus is not on the hen but on her love for her chicks and her sacrifice for them. It is a perfect metaphor for Christ's love and sacrifice for us.

Among people of faith and religion, there will always be critics, Pharisees who tell others they have it all wrong. All we can do is offer Christ's love and salvation to them. In his book *The Rebel Jesus*, Mike Slaughter comments that he can't feed people but he can show them the menu." That makes me think of Jesus' comment about those he could not gather under his wings: "you were not willing," he says, "and see, your house is left to you." Despite their brief kindness in warning Jesus about Herod, the Pharisees were unable to see him through fresh eyes and clean hearts. They could see him only through the lenses that had been passed down from generation to generation, lenses that had been smudged over time by use, lenses that no longer helped them see clearly. Jesus didn't fit their image of the Messiah, and I'm sure his metaphor of a mother hen didn't please them either. I wonder...does it fit ours? Is it his image we worship, or is it the saving grace he offered to us that matters in the long run?

Let us pray.

Lord, open the eyes of our hearts to see you as you wish us to see you, to know you for your acts of love and mercy and grace and the salvation that is ours when we believe in you, not only as we imagine you, but as we are unable to imagine you. May we never become so stuck in the image of your appearance that we can no longer imagine either your humble heart or your kingly power. Thank you for your loving kindness and your great sacrifice in our behalf. Blessed are you who comes in the name of the Lord. *Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Synthesis, Lent 2, Year C—Tradition, February 28, 2010.