

Who You Calling Chicken?

The other Sunday, our 12 year old scolded me after church for referring to God as "her."

She was quite sure I misspoke and told me to be more careful in the future, because, as she went on, "everyone knows God's not a girl, dad."

Which gave me my in to talk to her about the book of our earliest times, Genesis, where our fathers and mothers in faith imagine the beginning of all things; and there is God, creating humanity last of all; and God creates humanity in God's image, male and female he creates them, in God's own image, he creates them.

Tea was a bit startled by this, and since I can rarely startle her, I decided to keep going.

I took her to the poetry of the prophets, starting with Isaiah who has God imploring:

"Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb? How then can I forget you, oh my people?"

And again, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you....." (Isaiah 66:13).

The prophet Hosea sings the same song:

"How can I give you up? It was I who taught you to walk. I took you up in my arms; I healed you, led you with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I bent down to you *and fed you...*" (Hosea 11:3-4).

I understand Tea's discomfort, her unease in thinking about God as somehow soft, somehow vulnerable, meaning, in our still sexist age, somehow female.

Perhaps some of you share that unease.

How, after all, can we think of Almighty God, the creator of heaven and earth, as soft, as vulnerable?

Eli Weisel, a concentration camp survivor and Noble peace prize laureate, tells of the horrific day when the Nazi's hanged six teenagers to make some ghastly point.

As the boys hang, dying, twitching on the gallows, a man in the crowd roars out: "Where is our God?!"

And an old rabbi standing nearby replies, pointing to the boys on the gallows, "There is our God."

The sense of a suffering, vulnerable God is not widely accepted by many of the Jewish faith, and after the holocaust, many simply walk away from the faith of their parents.

Because God does not swoop in for the rescue, many reason, God either doesn't exist, or worse, God is indifferent to human suffering.

And what about us?

How do we grapple with this notion of a vulnerable God; a God who doesn't rescue us from our crosses, but who comes and hangs there with us?

We Christians are no less troubled than our Jewish brothers and sisters by the vulnerable, the seemingly soft, God.

Yet, the vulnerable God is as ancient as our faith.

You heard it today in Abram's encounter with God.

One thing in the story that is particularly strange to our modern ears is this whole business of cutting the cows and goats in half, and stacking the bodies so there is a pathway between the split corpses of these dead animals.

We're not talking sacrifice here.

In those days, that's how agreements get sealed.

Not with a handshake or with your John Hancock on the bottom line - instead, to seal the deal, the parties to the agreement both walk between the split in half dead animals - meaning: if I welsh on this deal, may what happened to these cows happen to me!"

There is submission of the parties to one another.

But did you hear it in today's lesson from Genesis?

Did you see it?

Only God walks the walk between the split animals.

Only God calls down the consequence: if I welsch on this deal, let me be like these mutilated cows.

Only God, in his covenant with Abram, binds himself so completely to us; *only God* puts God's neck on the block for us.

And what about Abram while God is doing all of this?

Abram's fast asleep.

Sound familiar?

I've been in the moving business lately.

You see, the American flag keeps moving right behind me here in the pulpit, and I keep moving it back to the other side of the chancel.

In our 2000-year history as a church, the practice of allowing national flags in the sacred spaces of the church is a very recent concession to national pride and patriotism.

It seems to have started during World War I but really took off during World War II.

I keep moving it back over there -- not because I'm anti-American-- but because the American eagle - there at the top of the flagpole, is the wrong bird for us Christians to focus on.

Eagles, as we Americans know, as the Roman Empire knew before us, are majestic birds of prey with sharp claws and flesh peeling beaks and wings strong enough to carry away small children.

It is a fearsome bird, and frankly, it has no place here in this or in any other church because, what the gospel tells me to preach and what you have given your lives to in baptism, is not an *eagle*, but a *chicken*.

Chickens, I'll grant you, aren't very majestic.

They are pretty useless as fighters -- they're as common as ants and they're not particularly handsome to look at.

We know a lot about chickens here at St. E's.

Just as our Wednesday healing service was getting started the other day, one of our many teenage chicks got lost in the back room and made a terrible racket until she got shushed out the door.

And as many of you know, we have quite a history with these chickens.

The day after Fr. Saimone died, a rooster showed up outside the rectory, followed by a few hens -- and they have kept a gaggle of chickens running all over the property ever since.

I know these chickens drive the gardeners in our community nuts, what with eating the lettuce and all, but having these chickens around tells me that maybe, just maybe, we are really starting to get it, when it comes to our faith.

Because the bird that our faith calls us to look up to as our role model, the bird that actually looks like and acts like God: the bird that ought to be at the top of every church flagpole, isn't the majestic eagle -- it's the chicken!

That's not me saying so, that's Jesus telling us so!

And he's telling us so right here, in today's gospel.

As he laments the hard hearts of his own people; he doesn't long to carry them off on eagle's wings, he doesn't call upon the lion of Judah to pounce and protect -- because Jesus is, like a mother hen - protective yet defenseless - loving, yet totally vulnerable to the teeth of that wily old fox.

And I think this is where C. S. Lewis gets it wrong in the Narnia stories, because Aslan, the talking lion, who represents Jesus, should have been a talking chicken instead!

Chest out, wings spread wide, the perfect target to be eaten by the foxes of this world: all the while, safeguarding her young brood behind her.

And at the same time, grieving for the chicks: the Herod's, the Pilate's, the ones who have it all together who refuse to seek the safety she offers in her death...

See, this is why Jesus is so maddening!

Just when we think we have a God of power and might, just when we think God invites *us* to live lives of power and might, here comes Jesus, in the form of a hen.

"Imitate me," Paul says today, "as I imitate Christ."

Be a chicken, be a mother hen!

That's why I can't have an eagle looking over my shoulder – because your God and mine isn't like an eagle at all, your God and mine is like a chicken.

"Imitate me," says Paul, "as I imitate Christ."

Sit with that for a minute while I tell you one last story.

Most of you remember the days when it was happening.

Back in August, 1991, a couple of years after the Berlin Wall fell, and shortly after the Soviet Union collapsed.

You'll remember on August 20, 1991, when martial law is declared in Russia, and Boris Yeltzin is holding on to civilian power by a thread.

The army is mobilized and a coup begins: everyone is told to go home and it appears the old guard is making a comeback.

Just then, the *babushkas*, the old Russian ladies who for nearly 80 years kept the church alive in a country that was officially atheist; these old ladies who are laughed at and condescended to for years -- the *babushkas* come out that night.

Some of these old ladies feed the pro-democracy supporters, others help out at medical stations, some kneel and pray for a miracle, and still others climb on top of the tanks and, staring into the slits at the army men inside, tell them that now they have new orders, orders from God: "You shall not kill."

The young men get out of their tanks.

The attack never comes.

After three days, the tide turns, and the old guard creeps away.

T. Long, Talking Ourselves into Being Christian (paraphrased).

Mother hens save the day for Mother Russia.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem.

Once there, he will spread his wings, and bare his chest, and the fox will indeed devour him.

The chicks will scatter, not one stands with him.

"Where is our God?!" The shout goes out from so many lips.

He is there, hanging on the tree.

Perhaps during this season of lent we might reconsider our love affair with eagles, our love affair with foxes, and pray:

Oh, gentle God, soften us!
Let the fire of your love
thaw the frost within us.
Let the light of Your justice
sear away our blindness,

Let the grace of Your compassion
heal our hardened spirits.

Oh, living God, soften us!
That, flowing with Your grace,
We be impelled to face the world
In bold compassion,

That, driven to justice,
we may dare to cry aloud
for the little ones,
the raped, the beaten
the imprisoned and the hungry.

Oh, living God, soften us!

Sweep us forward
in a mighty wave of mercy
to heal our hurting world.

(From: "There was no Path, So I trod One"; Edwina Gateley) .

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