

Under Chicken Wings

March 13, 2022

I want to show you my picture of a jaunty chicken. I bought this at Art Street, after a brief, but fun, friendship with a little flock in Southern Wisconsin. Let me tell you my story.

- I met four chickens at the barn where my daughter kept her horse. I rarely paid any attention until I watched a PBS story about raising chickens. The presenter said the best things about chickens was that they're "drama queens." He said he'd come after work, sit in a lawn chair, crack open a can of beer, and just watch the drama unfold.
- Without the beer, I tried that too. There's plenty of drama and more. But what I most noticed is that chickens have a delightful coo, love being handled and eat almost anything – grapes included.
- When I returned home, I looked into possibly raising a few chickens in my backyard. I checked for regulations on the Village of Ashwaubenon website. The cost would be substantial – a decked-out chicken coop would run about \$1,200.
- However, one of my friends put the damper on my idea. As a boy, he was in charge of chickens on the family farm. Using a bit more colorful language, he proclaimed "There is nothing worse than the stench of chicken poop." No wonder I enjoyed my chicken escapades so much. I have never had a sense of smell. Their cooing and affection captured my heart. Fortunately, my friend's comments captured my brain. No chickens on Balsam Way.

In our reading, we heard Jesus address the people of Jerusalem as chicks – he had hoped to gather them under his wing as a mother hen. They rejected him too, but I doubt because of the stench.

Let's look at where this story comes from. In Luke, Jesus spends much of his time teaching, healing and driving out demons. While a literal interpretation conjures up evil spirits, we look upon the demons as instances of mental illness or even an allegory to challenging social evils. It provides another instance of Jesus "delivering us from evil" – allowing God's world to break through into ours.

About the time of the feeding of the five thousand story, Jesus starts hinting to the disciples about his impending death. The disciples either ignore or deny it. Luke's Gospel proceeds with many miracle stories and a few nudges about that horrific ending. Recall these stories from the past few weeks of scripture:

- Jesus talks about the cost of discipleship – taking up our crosses.
- The transfiguration comes and goes – Pastor Bridget's description of the disco ball notwithstanding.
- Another death prediction.

- The disciples arguing about who is the greatest.

Now the journey toward Jerusalem begins in earnest. It may be many weeks until he rides through the delirious crowds in Jerusalem waving their palms in anticipation. We'll hear many familiar sermons:

- The lawyer asking, "Who is my neighbor?" followed by the parable of the Good Samaritan.
- Martha complaining about Mary sitting at Jesus' feet instead of helping with chores.
- Teaching the Lord's Prayer.
- Seeking treasure in Heaven rather than on earth.
- That pesky fig tree that will not bear fruit.
- Overturning the tables in the temple.
- Healing a woman on the sabbath. A blatant disregard for Jewish purity laws.
- Parables about the mustard seed and yeast.

And bam! Today's scripture comes along. It's short, testy and laden with chickens.

The Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him. That would certainly get our attention. John the Baptist paid dearly for speaking against Herod. It may have been that John drew large crowds; Jesus tends to have the same destabilizing effect.

And who knows the motivations of the Pharisees. We've got some mighty strong evidence they are not fans of Jesus – recall the temple overturned tables. Some of them dined with Jesus and some would later convert to Christianity. They may have honestly wanted to warn him. Or they may have wanted to divert him from Jerusalem to maintain their hold on temple worship. Nonetheless, the warning is set.

Jesus retorts "Tell that fox that I'm going to continue working – healing people, driving out demons, which I will do today, tomorrow and on the third day." As Christians, our ears perk up "on the third day." Of course, he means crucifixion and resurrection on the third day. In a theological sense, yes. An actual timetable? Probably not. Jesus knows his death and resurrection will come, but on whose timetable – Jesus' or Herod's?

No doubt the Pharisees will report Jesus' challenge to Herod; after all, they owe their positions to him. The fox comment will certainly irritate him instead of serving as a compliment of his cunning.

In his next breath, Jesus repeats the phrase "today, tomorrow and the third day," this time directing a rebuff to Jerusalem itself: "It is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem." If we get the double negative right, he's accusing Jerusalem as nothing but a killing

ground for those speaking truth to power. Jerusalem was long considered the city of God's people, granted in Deuteronomy. Here is an itinerant preacher blaspheming God's elect. Jesus calls it out as a capitol of injustice of both Roman and Jewish rule.

Just as Jesus cannot predict the exact time of its downfall, he knows that the temple will not stand in the face of Roman imperialism. Nor can the Pharisees. For now, the citizens live under an uneasy peace. As long as no public disruptions occur, everyone will be just fine.

Jesus calls to Jews and Gentiles alike to hear God's word. Herod worries that Jesus will have the same effect with the citizens of Jerusalem as he has had in the countryside. He also knows Rome would not put up with discord for long. The citizens of Jerusalem just don't see it that way. After all, Herod just built a magnificent temple for everyone – Jews and Gentiles. He is definitely on their side.

Jesus contends he has long wanted to gather all of Jerusalem together for care and protection, like a hen shielding her chicks under wing. He addresses Jerusalem directly, "but you would have none of it." It's as if they called back "No, Jesus, we're good! No problems here."

Jesus finishes with "You will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" – Palm Sunday.

When Jesus does enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he does so in a manner that opposes everything the Romans stand for. The Romans march into the city on the same day from a gate opposite where Jesus arrives. They enter as a Roman regiment – foot soldiers, horses, weaponry shining in the sun, heralds leading the procession. The Romans carry standards with golden eagles atop, reminiscent in our times of Nazi Germany. Hitler adopted the Roman motif for his own.

We recall Jesus' solo entry – a borrowed donkey, throngs excitedly waving palms, expecting a win against Roman occupation. The hen and chicks motif could not contrast more against war eagles from Rome.

Outside of quaint imagery, where does that leave us today? Living in the U.S. affords us many of the freedoms the citizens of Jerusalem probably felt. Peace was at hand as long as we stayed within the confines of the law. Sure, we grumble at tax time. Mandates about masking come and go. We have questions about voting laws but surely our democracy will stand – probably, at least. But it's been an uneven standard of freedom.

Colored people see it much differently. Swaths of our citizens remind us that Black Lives Matter in the face of uneven justice. Native Americans try to regain their land lost through discarded treaties. We still incarcerate people of varying skin colors as the need arises: immigration detainees, internment camps for Asians perceived as threats to American security. Just as in Jerusalem, it can be an uneasy peace.

Two weeks ago, the attorney general of Texas advised that anyone supporting young trans children could be investigated for child abuse. Children wonder whether the government will take them from their parents as they seek medical and psychological intervention. Already

vulnerable, experts foresee a rise in youth suicide as a result. Fortunately, a Texas judge issued a temporary injunction late last week.

Need we look any further than the Russian invasion of Ukraine? As I write this, the attacks have been going on for over two weeks. The Russians claim to seek only military targets, while doctors salvage what they can from bombed maternity and children's hospitals. To date, at least two million women and children have scrambled to the Polish border as men remained to fight. The daily headlines: Putin turns up the heat.

A Spanish theologian, Nathan Moser, writes about collusion of the church with political leaders. He points to Jesus' lament over Jerusalem as an age-old problem when churches align with politics. Moser asserts we must keep our eyes on Jesus who rejected Herod's threats to carry out his mission, regardless of one's personal vulnerability.

Moser writes from a historical perspective. In 1930s Spain, Supreme General Francisco Franco incited a civil war to take over the democracy. Gaining control of the army, Franco ordered them to attack Spanish citizens, with the church's blessing. As Germany prepared for war in Europe, Franco agreed to test Hitler's new weaponry. Franco won the civil war, remaining dictator of Spain for 40 years. His cooperation with Hitler led to World War II.

So, we ask ourselves – Are we the new Jerusalem? Do we watch Jesus even when the message is difficult and calls us to be vulnerable? Are we ready to pick up the cross? Will we join the refrain “No, Jesus, we're good. No problem here!”

While we prefer the nobility of soaring eagles, it may be time to seek our inner chick and nestle under the wings of the “One who comes in the name of the Lord.”

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