

In January of 2015, I kept a journal for my trip to Jerusalem. As we sat on the ancient steps, looking out over the Kidron Valley to the Mount of Olives, my teacher Vernon pointed to the hills around Jerusalem. I wrote: "I hadn't thought about how the City of David looks like (it's settled between) two wings of a mother hen, trying to swoop (the city) under her wing..." Ever since that trip to Jerusalem, this passage has held a special place in my heart. I find it so very comforting, which might seem strange to you.

It starts out so fiercely: Herod wants to kill you! The Pharisees warn Jesus. Jesus replies: "Go and tell that fox for me" that God has a plan for how all this will unfold and you will not thwart it. "I must be on my way: it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem." The tone is very aggressive and confrontational. It's a telling off. It's a leave me alone. It's a, "don't you dare even think you can get in my way." Then Jesus says: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem!" It's like a parent saying their child's name. You see anything said twice in scripture and you know there is intensity and passion and importance in what comes next. Surely Jerusalem and all her powerful influential leaders will be getting some kind of lecture.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" Jesus knows this ornery child at their worst. When they have turned away and God sent them prophets to turn them back to God, they do not only not listen, they kill the messenger. They stone the prophets. The very people who would have helped them, they murdered with hatred in their hearts. The history of these happenings is well known. Jesus, a prophet, is making his way there, and surely he too will have words of censure and destruction for this ornery city.

But no. It is a lament over the city that we hear. It is an opening up so we get to see God's breaking heart. "How often have I desired to gather your children together."

How often! This speaks to the persistence of God. And sure enough, when we read the First Testament through that lens we see how many times God could've given up on God's people and how many times God just would not let God's people go. This is the narrative that pulls every thread, every story, every poem, every prophecy together: from the beginning of the Bible until the end: God will not let these people go.

God has desired to gather the children together. This speaks to the inclusive nature of God. God wants to draw ALL the children near. Not just the poor and the helpless, but the persecutors and Herod.

God wants to gather God's children together as a hen gathers her brood.

This is one of many passages throughout scripture that I get to hold onto when I cannot connect as well to the metaphor of God as Father as I can to the metaphor of God as Mother.

When we think about it, we know God is not a man, and God is not a woman: God is God. But when God wants us to understand, with our human minds, a piece of what God is like, God uses similes and metaphors. God is a like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal son home. God is like a mother hen who calls to each one of her chicks. Sometimes, the unconditional love of Mother God is easier for my brain to comprehend, because my own mother showed me that kind of love. And this passage evokes that imagery: of God as a loving mother gathering all her babies under her wings.

That phrase "under God's wings" evokes so many other passages. In the Psalms we find it repeated over and over again. Psalm 17: "Keep me as the apple of the eye, hide me in the shadow of thy wings." Psalm 63: "Because thou hast been my help, therefore in the shadow of thy wings I will rejoice." And Psalm 91: "God shall cover thee with God's feathers, and under God's wings shalt thou trust."

I once sat next to a woman who always prayed with a large thick cozy scarf wrapped around her shoulders. She told me, when she wrapped herself in a scarf, she imagined the ends of the scarf to be the wings of God wrapping around her. Appropriate, I wonder if she knew, because "Kanap" the Hebrew word for "wing" can also be translated "garment."

So imagine God, on a cold day, stretching out the corner of her blanket: that we might cuddle beneath it in comfort.

Psalm 91 often feels like a warm blanket to me: the words promise we will find rest in the shadow of the almighty. God is our refuge. God is our fortress. God is our deliverer. God is our protector. God promises us: we need not fear anything because God is with us. We are saved. We will live forever.

God longs for us to come to her and be comforted by her warmth and belonging.

God longs for that, and Jesus laments: "you were not willing."

In this season of Lent, a season of confession, of introspection, of honesty on the journey, we can ask ourselves: Are we also not willing? Is there something that stops us from accepting this call to trust and protection and love? Are we willing to be gathered like baby chicks under Mother God's wings?

The knowledge that God wills it that everyone be there: everyone: even those we dislike, even those we disagree with, even those we judge undeserving, even those we do not want to share this intimate space with: that is convicting for me.

There are plenty of God's children who I don't like to think of as brothers and sisters and siblings: evil dictators, brutal murderers, judgmental bible thumpers, lazy people, loud people, petty people, proud people: everyone I like and don't like, love and try not to hate is welcome under God's wings. God longs for them just as much as God longs for me.

Are we willing to be gathered like baby chicks under Mother God's wings?

Perhaps that's a humiliating metaphor. I'm not a baby. I can take care of myself. I don't need God's unconditional love to get me through; I can get through it on my own. I am the provider. I am the protector. Don't compare me to a chick when I have proved my whole life that I am reliable and strong and hardworking and self-assured. Does that sound familiar?

Beloved, God longs for those of us who think we can make it through life without God. There is space for "the strong ones" under God's wings.

But are we willing to be gathered like baby chicks under Mother God's wings?

Perhaps we believe, if we come, we might be welcomed by Mother God, but all the other baby chicks? That's another story. They have a history of being unwelcoming.

We believe we might be rejected by them, so why come at all? Or maybe we believe we might even be rejected by God. We believe our doubt is too great. Our fear is too all-encompassing. Our anxiety is too shameful. We believe we have nothing to offer.

No. Beloved. Don't listen to those lies. Jesus longs for you. Jesus longs to gather you under God's wings like a mother hen. In the family of God, there may be some bullies who will try to tell you that you don't belong here: but Jesus speaks louder and you know his voice. Listen to the song the Spirit sings over you -- under God's wings.

Whatever reason you have for not coming when God calls, now is the time to admit it. Lent is the perfect time to confess it. Lent is the time to know you are forgiven and you are

welcome. And lent is the time to grieve over all the people who will not come under the wings of God.

Jesus says: “See, your house is left to you.” He says: look at the bed you made and you must sleep in it. He grieves over what he sees and so do we. So many of God’s children are warring and wounding and going their own way. When we mourn over the way things are, fully knowing the way things could be, Jesus is right there with us; crying over every headline, every horrific photograph, every hellish happenstance. We do not weep alone. The heart of God breaks with ours. When there is little other comfort, the knowledge that I serve a God who weeps with me has been the warm blanket wrapped ‘round my shoulders as I sob.

The lectionary reading ends with these words: “you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’” Those words will be sung by the disciples when Jesus enters Jerusalem, a day we will celebrate on Palm Sunday. These words pave the path up to the cross.

The cross is where God demonstrated a flaw in the theology of so much of the scriptures. Throughout scripture you will find this idea: when bad things happen to you, it means you are a bad person. When evil things befall you, it is because you are suffering punishment for something evil you have done. But we reinterpret all of those scriptures in the light of Christ.

The cross shows us that the most good, the most kind, the most holy one, Jesus Christ, had a bad thing, the worst thing, happen to him: Jesus was crucified and tortured on a shameful cross. Bad things happen to good people. And the best comfort we can hold onto when we go through terrible things is that we do not go through it alone. Mother God, the hen who calls for all her babies, is with us and loves us and shelters us under the wings of God.

Whether these are the metaphorical wings of an Eagle in Psalm 91 or the wings of a hen in Luke 13, there is an intimacy God is trying to communicate to us and invite us into that provides so much comfort. We look to the cross, for there God sympathizes with sinners, goes through everything to be with us, and makes sure we know: we go through nothing alone.

So be willing, beloved, to answer God’s call. Come and find refuge under God’s wings.