

Sermon for March 13, 2022

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“How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

We have three small dogs at our house. Inevitably the second you lay down, the pack follows, launching up onto the bed to stake their claim for the night. Stormy is our under the covers dog. Bounding up onto the bed he comes and stands on your pillow and stares at you until you take up the proper position, laying on your right side and liftings up the covers so he can slip underneath and snuggle right up against you, tucked underneath your resting left arm. He loves to be gathered in underneath your wing, feeling your warmth and the movement of each breath and heartbeat. He loves it... when HE decides that this is where is he wants to be and only when HE is in charge of the relationship.

There is no being gathered and tucked in when he has decided he'd rather play than go to bed. There is no being gathered when one demands a late night bone or treat. Being gathered is great when you have just gotten a haircut but forget it when your fur grows and you get too hot. And there is absolutely no being gathered by someone in the wrong position, left sides and right arms are offensive. The youngest dog, Chewy, after months of watching Stormy and a new haircut, decided to give this under the covers, tucked in, position a try. And Stormy has made it abundantly clear that he will not be gathered under a shared wing. With any bump in the night, Stormy flies out from underneath your arm to investigate. Much of the night can involve lifting up arm and blanket to invite this loved furball back under wing. In contrast if Chewy actually manages to claim the spot, he doesn't move an inch...ever.

This week after reading the gospel for today I got the giggles during this nighttime routine. We are a world, a people, of Stormys. We love to be gathered in and held by God when WE decide and only when WE are in charge of the relationship and OUR expectations are met. Great when we are tired, cold, in need of comfort and able to define the circumstances... not so much if it requires us to be a little uncomfortable, keeps us from the things we want, or heaven forbid requires us to gather with others under the same wing. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem... how often I have desired to gather...but you were not willing!”

Jerusalem had its own idea of God, of how God should position God's self in the world, to whom and how God should offer care. Jerusalem didn't like being gathered under shared wing. Jerusalem had its own desire to be held a specific way. It rejected the word, the invite of God, first from the prophets, then the very Word made flesh – Jesus. And in the text we hear God's longing “how often have I desired to gather, to mother, to hold you in abundant love...but you were not willing.” How often we are not willing...

“I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.” This week, as I wrestled with this scriptural image of a hen gathering her chicks and an unwilling

people, I heard two startling stories on national news. Over 200,000 kids have been orphaned by Covid in the United States. This number is 5.2 million globally. More than 1 million children have been displaced by the war in Ukraine. Millions of children in need of gathering wing.

With the faces of these children in my head, I hear, I feel the words “How I long to gather your children together....” I read the Psalm and I wonder what these orphaned children hear in these verses - “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers close in against me to devour my flesh...though an army encamp against me... though war rise up against me, my trust will not be shaken. For in the day of trouble, God will give me shelter...” What does this look like, how is one to live in this trust, in the reality of today?

The Psalmist seems so confident in the promise of God. But in the second half of the Psalm we read “Hear my voice, O LORD, when I call; have mercy on me and answer me...Hide not your face from me.....” Even as the writer utters words of faith, he pleads with God to reveal Godself in the midst of the harsh circumstances. Are the children pleading? Does it feel to them like God is hiding?

I read our two texts side by side:

The words of one devoured by evil, surrounded by opposing army, amidst war utters “Hide not your face from me....”

God utters to God’s people - “How I desire to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings...but you were not willing...”

Back to those two new stories with the shocking statistics - they continued. In the case of children orphaned by Covid they told of a school councilor and her husband who learned of four siblings who lost both parents. This couple helped the oldest daughter secure custody of the younger ones, walked the process of securing supportive funds and continues to pay the house payments to keep these children in their home.

Alongside the statistics of displaced Ukrainian children was story after story of adults from Ukraine, Poland, the United States taking action to provide safety and shelter for the children. A nurse from a hospital for sick children traveling by train with a young boy who needed continued treatment across the border. A middle aged couple traveling with two 10 day old newborns across the border to connect them to their new families who had been unable to enter the country to receive them..

Willing wings...gathering the children...a glimpse of God.

Even as we wrestle with our own willingness and our own need to be gathered and held, God invites us to be God’s wings gathering in the world. In our baptism we are filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and sent forth into the world as God’s people for the sake of the world God loves. During the Lenten season we are called to turn, to return, to be willingly embraced by

God's love and care, to recognize our dependence on this wing. But we are also called to let the Spirit take wing in and through us and our response to the world God loves.

Like Stormy I fluctuate between being embraced and running away with my own agenda. Like the Psalmist my faith fluctuates between confidence in God as our stronghold and a pleading that God stop hiding. But maybe in the moments God uses us as willing wings in the world, not only do those we embrace catch a glimpse of God their stronghold, so do we and our hearts are broken open to be willingly embraced once again.