

## ***"Like a Mother Hen"***

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Let's open our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, gather us and protect us, like a mother hen. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

Knock, knock. [Who's there?] Irish. [Irish who?] Irish you a happy St. Patrick's Day!

What do you call a fake Irish gemstone? A shamrock.

Why should you never iron a four-leaf clover? You'd be pressing your luck!

One more ... How is a best friend like a four-leaf clover? They're hard to find and lucky to have!

There's lots of clover growing at our cabin near Huntsville and last summer, Grant, a friend of our son Taylor, found about a dozen four leaf clovers! I've looked my whole life and never found one. Grant's four-leaf clovers are now safely pressed in a lucky old book at the cabin.

Patrick, who became St. Patrick, lived in the fifth century. The Roman Empire that was so violent and oppressive during the time of Jesus, was beginning to break up and Europe was about to enter the Dark Ages. Rome fell in the year 410 to barbarian invaders and within ten years, Roman forces began to leave Britain to defend positions back home. Life in Britain became chaotic and uncertain in the absence of the tyrannical authority of Roman rule. It was in this chaotic and uncertain time that Patrick was born.

Patrick was born in Roman Britain to a wealthy family and was not a religious youth. He was kidnapped at age 16 by Irish pirates and transported to Ireland where he was enslaved as a shepherd until he escaped six years later. He returned home to Britain and undertook studies

to become a priest, with the intention of returning to Ireland as a missionary. Patrick returned and rose to become the Bishop of Ireland. Legend credits Patrick with teaching the Irish about the Holy Trinity using a three-leafed shamrock to represent the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as one God. Patrick is believed to have died on March 17<sup>th</sup> late in the fifth century.

During the time of Jesus, it was a chaotic and uncertain time. The Romans were violent and oppressive and various parts of the Jewish population learned to live with the Romans by relating to them in different ways. The Romans appointed Herod the Great, who was raised Jewish, to rule with tyrannical authority over all Judea. One of Herod the Great's great feats was the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple. Matthew records that it was Herod the Great who met the Wise Men and after being tricked, ordered the massacre of all children under two years old, in and around Bethlehem.

Herod the Great died a few years after Jesus was born and his territory was willed to his three sons, one of whom was Herod Antipas, who was given the region of Galilee. Herod Antipas had John the Baptist beheaded at the request of Salome, the daughter of his wife Herodias. Herod Antipas fell in love with Herodias while she was still married to his half-brother Herod II. What a mess of heinous Herods.

It's Herod Antipas that Jesus refers to as a fox in that chaotic and uncertain time just days before Good Friday. In our gospel reading this morning, Luke describes a conversation that Jesus has with some Pharisees, a conversation that is riddled with imagery, including the imagery of the fox and the hen.

The Pharisees are usually presented as Jewish religious leaders who oppose Jesus. A little earlier, Luke says that "the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile toward Jesus and to cross-examine him about

many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say." The Pharisees reveal that Herod Antipas wants to kill Jesus, information that we know is not out of character for Herod Antipas. The Pharisees' warning might be interpreted as helpful for Jesus, but it likely hides ulterior motives. Jesus responds by telling them to "go tell that fox for me," implying that they are in cahoots with the calculating, conniving Herod. Herod Antipas may have wanted Jesus to leave his territory so that he didn't have to deal with him. This desire to have the problem literally "go away" resurfaces between Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate over who is responsible to condemn Jesus to death on a cross. The fox is clever, sly and unprincipled. The Old Testament also associates the fox with destruction. Jesus shows disdain for the sly, cunning, and voraciously destructive Herod and his messengers.

There was an article in *National Geographic* that provided a graphic picture of protection under God's wings. After a forest fire in Yellowstone National Park, forest rangers began their trek up a mountain to assess the damage. One ranger found a bird literally petrified in ashes, perched statuesquely on the ground at the base of a tree. Somewhat sickened by the eerie sight, he knocked over the bird with a stick. When he struck it, three tiny chicks scurried from under their dead mother's wings.

The loving mother bird, keenly aware of impending disaster, moved her offspring to the base of the tree and gathered them under her wings. She could have flown to safety, but refused to abandon her babies and remained steadfast in the fiery blaze. She was willing to die, so that those under the cover of her wings would live. It's a wonderful, motherly image of Jesus.

The image of a mother hen protecting her chicks is rooted in the Old Testament. In the book of Ruth, it refers to "the God of Israel, under whose

wings you have come for refuge." In Second Esdras, God says, "I gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings." And in the Psalms there are references to the protective refuge of God's wings in Psalms 17, 37, 57, 61, and 91. The imagery of God in the Bible is both fatherly and motherly.

The evil, predatory fox is lurking nearby. The danger to God's people is real and present. But we have our nurturing, protecting God: a mother hen who instinctively draws us under her wings when danger threatens. It's a tender and loving motherly image of God and God's love for us.

Jesus tells us that God opposes the sly work of the devil in Herod. It will come to a head in Jerusalem, the site of the Jerusalem Temple; Herod's Temple. Jesus will continue his work casting out demons, healing the sick and demonstrating the power of God for three more days on his way to Jerusalem; three more days to complete his earthly work. The three days also foreshadow the three days from Good Friday to Easter Sunday during which Jesus definitively defeats the devil by overcoming death. Jesus told his disciples, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." Jesus' fate is divinely determined; God is in control; not that fox Herod and not the devil.

In a final bit of irony, Jesus concludes his conversation with the Pharisees by quoting a familiar greeting, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." It's a quote from Psalm 118 and was exclaimed by pilgrims travelling into Jerusalem, including the disciples travelling down the path from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem, waving palm branches as they accompany Jesus riding upon a young donkey.

The Rev. Dr. Leah Schade, Assistant Professor of Theology at Lexington Theological Seminary relates a conversation that she had with a mother who knew she could not protect her daughter from the drugs and

alcohol that had taken over her daughter's life. The mother's tears flowed as she recounted the many times she tried to bring her daughter back into the loving embrace of her family, away from the fox of addiction. But every time, her daughter made choices that pulled her farther and farther away. Instead of having the protection of her mother's wings, she served time in jail, took refuge in strangers' homes, and wandered the streets of the city. It's difficult to be a loving mother whose wings are always open to protect her chicks when they reject her protection. It must have been how Jesus felt; how God felt; as Jesus travelled for those last three days to Jerusalem. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" Like a mother hen sacrificing her life to protect her chicks in the midst of a forest fire, Jesus will soon be nailed to a cross.

God, in Jesus and through the Holy Spirit, calls our names and seeks to comfort us and protect us under her wings. The fox is tempting us nearby, but we are all forever called, forever nurtured, and forever protected by our mother hen, who died for us and rose again so that we might truly live. Thanks be to God. Amen.