

The last couple days as we took photographs for the new directory, I sat and greeted folks as they came in, listened to the chatter from behind the screen and watched proud parents gaze at their children from the side as special poses were taken. I wished I'd had a camera myself to capture some of those smiles on the parents. Our children touch our hearts in special ways. Even though sometimes our patience is tested, we would do just about anything for them. We long for everything to go right for them; we are in anguish when they are in difficult situations; our hearts break for them when they make poor decisions and we can't help them; we yearn for them to return to us if they turn away.

That's kind of like what I imagine Jesus feeling as he laments over Jerusalem – "How often I would gathered you under my wings as a hen gathers her chicks, but you were not willing," he cries. Jerusalem – the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. Jerusalem – the holy city of the faith of our Jewish ancestors who have finally settled in their promised land; yet at the same time the place where religiosity and a kind of legalism has developed that sees God's prophets as threats. Jerusalem stands as a center of hope even as today our Jewish sisters and brothers say to each other, "Next year in Jerusalem!" as a cry of hope. Jerusalem is rather a metaphor for the holy city of God that descends from heaven, cleansed and pure at the end of time and the beginning of God's reign. Yet today Jerusalem is claimed by three major world religions as a holy center, and is a place of contention and fighting. The city of peace is full of conflict. Jesus looks out at that city Jerusalem – and yearns for the people to be gathered to God, knowing at the same time that Jesus will be killed here.

We can identify – we know the yearning, the longing, the anguish, the heartbreak. And God feels that for us, and for all humanity.

Jesus uses the imagery of the mother hen, one of the few examples of female images used for God in the Scriptures. I'm glad there are some in there – Jesus actually uses several, and there are a few in the Hebrew Scriptures as well. There's actually a children's book out called God Is Like A Mother Hen that gathers feminine metaphors for God, along with cute illustrations. Now I'm not a farm person, so I haven't seen this first hand, but

several of the commentators I read say that they've seen this – its often a protective thing, and sometimes just a gather and sleep warm thing, a keep them all together under my eye thing. Its got a welcoming feel about it, though, a safety feel, a “you are mine” feel, like kids running back to Mom on the playground, like a warm hug of greeting. And Jesus says this even to those that are going to kill him – and to us who will also break his heart in many ways.

On this 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent, Jesus invites us to see God calling with this same kind of broken heart, and all over US, over our wandering hearts, our wavering faith, our bad decisions, our failures of love, our waspish tongue, our lack of forgiveness; our holding back from throwing ourselves onto God in total trust and love. In our Bible study, we've looked recently at the way the father runs to greet his lost son, his dignity and stateliness tossed aside as he runs – and while that son is still far off, too, although he has started back. In the same chapter of Luke, Jesus tells of the shepherd who goes out after dark to search out that one lost sheep; then a third time he tells about the woman who turns her house upside down searching for that lost coin. God wants us back in the deepest way.

And it doesn't really take much to turn to God in love and faith, to be encompassed in those wings and gathered up. What do we see in Abraham? He believed God – and that was enough. He didn't have to totally change his life, become the stellar saint in town, rehabilitate himself and make himself shiny enough for God – he just had to believe God's promises. He didn't have to change the world, he didn't have to see justice prevail or his offspring become as numerous as the grains of sand – he just believed God's promises. The apostle Paul uses this verse when he writes in the letter to the Hebrews about people of faith in the past – that Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. Not that people continued in their bad ways; and not that they never fell short again – but that they believed God.

Abraham and Sarah never really saw God's promises come true for a long time; they took off for the land God would show them, got bogged down with various kings taking them in, gave the best land to the nephew Lot (who got in trouble in Sodom), remained childless for a long, long time until Sarah went through menopause – the Bible euphemistically says that, “it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.” What about God's promises of multitudes of descendants that would bless the world? What

about becoming a great kingdom? Yet Abraham and Sarah believed God. Eventually they had a son – Isaac – but just Isaac. And they were in the land God took them to, but it was never a kingdom. Yet Abraham believed God, and it was counted as righteousness. In the passage we read earlier, Abraham does question a bit – well, I don't have a son, he says, and right now my nephew is my heir. And sometimes he tries to protect himself from the envy of other kings and says Sarah is his sister – which almost gets them in trouble. And at one point he and Sarah try and force God's hand on the son thing with Sarah's maid Hagar, which lands them in trouble. And when the angels come and tell them the son is on the way when Sarah is already old, she gets a good laugh out of it – and you remember that Isaac's name means "laughter". YET....YET....Abraham and Sarah believe God, and its counted for them as righteousness.

Sometimes its difficult for us to accept being so beloved. Somehow we want to earn it or merit it before just believing it – or maybe we want to see the whole picture with absolute certainty before just believing it. Yet that's all that we have to do – believe God, believe and set out - believe and return – believe and begin - that's it. Respond just a bit. Take a step in trust.