

The Rev. Kristin Krantz  
St. James', Mt. Airy  
2/21/16

Lent 2C  
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18  
Psalm 27  
Philippians 3:17-4:1  
Luke 13:31-35

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.**

My son Zachary was born during spring break of my second year of seminary. When he was 3 months old I had a crisis of faith.

You see, he went in for his second round of vaccines, and as is expected, he had an immune reaction. His thigh swelled up, hot and red, and he started to cry. He cried and cried and cried, sobbing his heart out for over an hour, until his little body was literally worn out, and he fell asleep.

There was nothing I could do to take away his pain. I was powerless. The only thing I could do was hold him close and cry right along with him. In those panicked moments, if I'd had the power, I would have done anything to take away his pain, to protect him from it.

And I remember clearly thinking about God and power and suffering. In my head I railed, "God, if you're all powerful, if you love what you've created, if you are our father and mother, how in the world can you watch the suffering of the world and do nothing?"

That wasn't the first time I had wrestled with these questions of faith. By that point theodicy and I were old friends. Those are still the questions I wrestle with.

But back then, in that moment of powerlessness and grief, I could only see – or perhaps better stated *feel* the questions in stark **black and white** – in *if/thens*.

*If God is all powerful and chooses not to act in the face of suffering,*

*then God must not care.*

*There is no way I can call God a loving mother or father.*

*If God doesn't care, then that's no God I want to believe in.*

*I can no longer believe in God.*

It was simplistic, yes. Fierce thoughts in the heat of the moment. And it was an admittedly challenging time. I was in the midst of the bewildering landscape of postpartum depression. And just as importantly, I was in the middle of seminary – a journey that seems to bring out multiple bouts of doubt, as we are asked to wrestle with our understanding of God, scripture, and ourselves in ways that push limits.

I wish I could say that when Zach woke from his exhausted slumber his normal, happy self, that my belief in God also magically returned to what it had been.

But it didn't. I was shaped by those minutes of pain, by the thoughts of my heart, and so my understanding of who God was changed as well. For me it was a theological event. That day forever affected how I would know God, and understand God as a parent.

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Scholar Kathryn Matthews has written that Lent is a season for hard questions and uncomfortable truths. A time to take a hard look at the obstacles between us and God, not just on our personal spiritual path, but also on the road toward a new world of justice, wholeness, and peace.<sup>1</sup>

Hard questions, uncomfortable truths, and obstacles on the path, are all a part of our Gospel reading today.

Jesus is steadily moving towards Jerusalem, but for now he is still on the road, in the Galilee, casting out demons and curing people. Proclaiming boldly the coming of the reign of God in the verse just before where our passage today begins, *“Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”*

He wasn’t in Jerusalem yet, but word of his words and deeds had already made it, and those in power took notice.

And so today we see a group from Pharisees come to Jesus to warn him to leave, for Herod Antipas wants to kill him.

*Hard questions.* Why were these Pharisees, members of the religious elite who have not been friendly to Jesus before now, warning him to flee Herod? Why does Herod want to kill Jesus? What would it mean for Jesus to heed their warning?

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<sup>1</sup> *Weekly Seeds* by Kathryn Matthews at [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org).

*Uncomfortable truths.* In Jesus' response to the Pharisees we glimpse again what is to come – “*Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.*” – a shadow of the three holy days we are journeying toward again. And then a lament for Jerusalem – the place where death awaits those who speak truth to power.

*Obstacles between us and God.* The temptation for Jesus to turn from the work he has been called to do in the face of danger. The temptation to give into fear.

These challenges that Jesus faced? They're ours too. We have to ask the hard questions, and acknowledge the uncomfortable truths, and recognize the obstacles between us and God.

How else can we grow in faith, can we deepen our relationship with God, can we work to create a world where justice, compassion and reconciliation are known realities?

Sometimes we do this together. We do it when we study scripture and wrestle with its meaning together. We do it when we walk with one another in times of stress or crisis. We do it when we come before God and each other and confess our sins.

But it is also our personal work, something we are each called to do, especially as a part of our Lenten journey. I invite you into this work through prayer.

What are your hard questions? Ask them and pray them.

What are your uncomfortable truths? Name them, face them, and pray them.

What are your obstacles? Pray them, and then move them.

I don't say this blithely. It is not simple work. It is not quick work. And before you lose heart, know this – we are never alone in it.

Approaching his Passion and the powers that be, Jesus said, *“How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings?”*

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I remember how excited I was when I learned to tune into feminine imagery in the scriptures, something that was deeply important to me as young woman. All those times that we hear of being raised up on eagle's wings and hidden under the hen's wings – those are all the behaviors of loving mothers.

The eagle who teaches her young to soar by first teaching them to hover of the safety of their nest, spreading her wings so they do not tumble to their death from the eyrie, nurturing them so that only when they are strong enough to fly on their own will they venture into the world beyond.

And the hen. The homely hen, who has lived in the backyards of humans for thousands of years, who is selfless in her devotion to her little ones, even more defenseless than she. She has no defenses against the arts and wiles of foxes except her courage and commitment.

She will rush to their sharp teeth and long claws, their looming shadow, their fierce bloodlust, throwing herself upon the bodies of her chicks, extending her wings over them, letting herself be devoured in the hope that they may be spared. She does not run from her fears.<sup>2</sup>

And today we hear Jesus proclaim just such a love.

Scholar Timothy Shapiro gives us this lovely contemporary image, the Mom who folds the covers down on the bed and puffs up the pillow, caring for us, while at the same time saying, “Don’t let me ever catch you doing that again.” What a beautiful way to describe both accountability and mercy.<sup>3</sup>

This is God as a parent that I can relate to.

This is a God that I can believe in.

Because what I came to understand when my heart settled, and Zachary woke up all better that day years ago, was that I couldn’t relate to some all-powerful, all-knowing parent in the sky, a chess player, dispassionately moving pieces around the board of life. My childish image of God as divine super-hero could no longer stand.

But what I did come to know, was that my hard questions, my uncomfortable truths, and the obstacles between myself and God, were a prayer of lament not unlike that which Jesus voices about Jerusalem in our Gospel.

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor.

<sup>3</sup> *Weekly Seeds* by Kathryn Matthews at [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org).

When we lament we question why, we rail against God, we shake our fists in anger, and we cry. But we always end with trust and hope. We circle back to the promise that God has made to always be with us, that we are not alone, and that we are gathered under God's wings, just as Jesus promised.

And when I look back at that day now, even as I remember so clearly the black and white assured thoughts swirling in my head then, *now* – now I understand the uncomfortable truth that God was there all along. Not with an answer to my questions or a show of power. No, she was simply there embracing me just as I embraced Zach, sheltering us under her wing and crying right along with us, pouring out her love in response to my lament, and unconditionally offering hope for resurrection.

For this is the truth of Lent that brings us close to the Mystery of Easter:

The fox prowls,  
the hen spreads her wings.  
The fox will kill,  
the hen give life.  
The fox will live,  
the hen will die.  
The fox knows what he is doing  
but not as well as the hen.  
The fox too will die,  
his killing unfinished.  
But on the third day  
we will see what it is  
to choose  
to be the hen.<sup>4</sup>

~ AMEN ~

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<sup>4</sup> Steve Garnaas-Holmes, [www.unfoldinglight.net](http://www.unfoldinglight.net).