

There's a bit of a down-side to having been in a place for 6 or more years. You see, the Episcopal Church uses a three year cycle of readings, meaning that every three years, the same reading rolls around. While that's neat in that we get to hear most of the bible, it can be a preacher's challenge. Today is a case in point. I told this story 9 years ago when these lessons were read, and then 6 and 3 years ago when they were again read, and I'm telling it again now. On the second Sunday in Lent of 2010, I will probably tell it again. It's a good and true story that I think it adds a new dimension to our Gospel. It certainly has for me.

You may remember that before we moved to Fort Myers, I had a split position in north east Texas. I was the pastor of a small rural mission and the director of a homeless shelter in Texarkana. One day, I was working in my Texarkana office when my pager went off with the digital code for an emergency. I called in and was told that George and Sandy Faison's house was on fire. George and Sandy were not only parishioners, but good friends. They lived in a mobile home on ten acres of land outside Atlanta, about 30 miles from where I was at the time. I could just imagine the devastation if the trailer had caught, so I rushed to their property.

When I got there, actually beating some of the fire equipment, I saw that in fact, their house was not on fire, but everything else on the property had been destroyed: the barn, their truck, the chicken house, the horse stable, everything they had in storage including 30 years of George's sermons. No one had been hurt, and none of the animals seemed hurt.

There wasn't much I could do, the fire was still too hot to get near without gear. So, George and I started herding the chickens into safer surroundings. They had about 12 adult chickens and 5 or 6 young chicks. As we were picking the frightened birds up and carrying them to another pen, I noticed that one bird had all of its tail feathers burned off.

George said, that as the fire engulfed the chicken house, all of the birds flocked to the furthest corner. This particular hen stood with her back to the fire and opened her wings so that the young birds could hide. She stood there like that, protecting these chicks, none of whom were hers, while the fire swept toward her. It was only after a fire fighter turned his water nozzle on the hen and her brood, sending them helter skelter across the enclosure, that she quit her post.

So, when Jesus tells of wanting to gather the people of Jerusalem like a hen gathers her brood under her wings the picture I get is of this bird literally being burnt alive to protect these young chicks.

I hadn't really thought about this before, but how did the chicks know to gather together in the corner? Must have been some sort of instinct that said, "when danger comes hunker down with all your fellow chicks and someone will protect you."

I don't care what political flavor one might be, I think we can all agree that this is a dangerous world. I saw a Baptist pastor being interviewed last night about crime in the eastern part of the city. He allowed as how he either had or was thinking of getting a shotgun to protect himself when he was alone in the church. I know the man. He's not usually prone to histrionics. I truly believe he is scared of his own neighborhood.

I'm scared about the state of the world right now. We're in a war that, once again, is dividing the nation. We have very real enemies who possess really bad weapons and apparently the will to use them. Drugs are ruining the lives of two generations. And the problem is getting bigger and bigger. I don't know if we're doing a better job of publicizing sex crimes against children or if there really is an up-surge of these predators. O and don't even get me started on global warming and the safety of our food supply.

It is a dangerous world we live in.

So, how do we react to danger? What do our instincts tell us to do when our lives are threatened by the fire of sin and death? I'm afraid the majority of Americans, perhaps of humanity, complain, gripe, turn cynical all the while the fire encroaches ever nearer.

We Episcopalians believe that the church is more than a gathering of like minded people who come together for worship and then leave until they gather again. We believe that the church is the Body of Christ. We are church whether we're in a gathering, or alone. We who are baptized into the Body, are the church.

The church should be like the chicks running together for safety, for comfort, for hopefulness, waiting for the loving arms of Jesus to protect us. I'd like to suggest that those arms can be the church as well.

Whenever we are in danger of the fires of this life, we, the church, huddle together under the wings of God, the community of faithful witnesses, the Church.

When the church is being the church, it will be the sheltering wings under which her members, you and I, run for protection and comfort.

There's another oft told story, this one just that, a story, about a man who refused to go to church saying he didn't need to. The local pastor visited his home one day. After the pleasantries and the usual, "I don't need church" conversation, the pastor got up and walked to the roaring fireplace. Using a pair of tongs, he got a small ember and took it out of the fire and set it apart on the hearth. In a matter of moments, the ember died. The man started coming to church.

We Americans are real individualists. It's in the water. But we cannot survive if we try to do it alone. That's where the community of faith comes in. When the church is being the church, we are the fire which keeps our embers alight.

Divorce, death of a loved one, career set backs, illness, doubt, despair, fear. These are a few of the fires which threaten us from time to time. They can be times when we hide from the world. But these are exactly the times we need the protecting wings of the Church. These are the times to run into the corner of the pen and let Jesus gather us under his wings.

Of course, this only holds true if the church is a safe place. It's not always, you know. Sure there are reported cases of physical and sexual abuse. But that's not the only thing that can make a place feel unsafe.

Until the 60's and in some places even today, many churches weren't safe places for African Americans. The message was quite clear. I even heard a pastor say this out loud and in public 10 years ago. "Blacks and Whites are not meant to worship together. We're just too different."

There are a lot of people who don't feel safe in church because of their positions on the current crisis facing the church, the authority and interpretation of scripture, especially in the matter of homosexuality and what it means to be in communion. Gay men and lesbians often find themselves in congregations that really can't minister to them. Some feel that the church is turning its back on them. Conversely, many feel that because they hold a traditional view, they are not wanted.

Some people don't feel safe in church because of a perception that they are being judged. We wonder why youth and young adults don't come flocking to places like here. Are we a safe

place for them to come? Will we make them feel judged, criticized, held to an unrealistic standard?

In the midst of a dangerous world, people will not wait for the protecting arms of Christ if they think those wings will not be there for them. Picture this. 20 years ago a man walked into an Episcopal church in Dallas. The man asked the priest if the priest would bury him when he died. The priest said he would, but wondered about the question. The man said that he had gone to 12 churches and asked them the same question. They all said no when he told them he was dying from AIDS.

Those little chicks trusted that they would be saved by the wings of a bird allowing herself to be burned. When the world seems to be burning all around us, may we, too, gather together under the wings of the Church trusting that we are under the wings of Christ himself. And as we see the scared and hurting looking for a safe corner, may we be those wings, loving them so intently that we allow ourselves to carry the scars of sacrifice.

And, picture Jesus, stretching out his arms on the cross, scarred so that we might be saved from the fires of sin and death.