



Sermon

The Second Sunday in Lent, Year C

March 16, 2025

Luke 13:31-35

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In a book called *The Three Mothers*, an author named Anna Malaika Tubbs traces the biographies of the mothers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin.¹ In tracing the biographies of Alberta, Louise, and Berdis from their births around 1900 to the close of that century, Tubbs examines their influences and potential influences upon their famous sons: how their lives and decisions, the impossible situations that each of them faced time and time again, may have instilled—likely did instill—the resolve, courage, and resistance we know them to have. Where did they get it? Tubbs suggests convincingly that they got a lot of it from their mothers.

In tracing the biographies of Alberta, Louise, and Berdis, she also examines womanhood and motherhood—especially Black womanhood and Black motherhood—during that century. In examining particularly Black womanhood and motherhood, she quotes a woman as writing, “I wish that I had a formula that I could have shared in response to the recurring [question] ‘How did you do it?’” How *did* you stand up to injustice? How *did* you make a way out of no way? How *did* you summon untold courage time and time again? This author writes, “I called upon the age-old tradition of the black everywoman [sic], doing everything simply because *I had to* [italics original].”²

Doing it simply because I had to, because there was no other way, no other option: A woman, a mother, doing what needs to be done because it *has* to be done, and sometimes there is only one way or option to do it. When given one option, what does one do? Just does it. Alberta, Louise, and Berdis faced time and again throughout their lives and their families’ lives less than ideal options, often only one. How did they do it? Why did they do it? Because they had to. Because that’s who they are, and that’s what they did.

¹ Anna Malaika Tubbs, *The Three Mothers: How the Mothers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin Shaped a Nation* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2021).

² Bethany M. Allen in her essay “My Girl”, quoted in Tubbs, p. 29

Jesus today likens himself to a mother, in the face of danger, in the face of Herod, “that fox”. In the face of claims on his life and risks that are to come, he likens himself to a mother. Why does he do that?

In part, he is quoting scriptural allusions to God as mother, which occur earlier in scripture. (So often what Jesus is saying are actually quotations from scriptures that might not register to us immediately!) Numerous times in the Hebrew scriptures God is likened to a mother, even a mother bird. In the Psalms we hear, “Hide me under the shadow of your wings” (Psalm 17:8), “Let me take refuge in the shadow of your wings” (Psalm 57:1), “Under these wings I will find refuge” (Psalm 91:4). We also hear in Deuteronomy and Exodus that God is like an eagle, specifically a mother eagle, who would carry her eaglets upon her wings: “You saw what I did,” God says in Exodus, “how I carried you on eagle’s wings and brought you to myself” (Exodus 19:4).³ Eagles are a little different than chickens in that they spend a little more time in the air, so a mother eagle is known not only to shelter her young under her wings or carry her young upon her wings, but also to teach her young how to fly. To learn how to fly, they need to risk falling, so a mother eagle is also known to shoo her young out of the nest, watch them try to fly, and swoop down underneath them so that they do not actually “dash their foot against a stone” (Psalm 91:12).

God is, then, quite like a mother bird: sheltering, protecting, carrying, bearing, and guiding. Why does Jesus choose this name for himself, when his own life is at risk, when the powers that be are villains and foxes? I have to think he also learned quite a lot from his mother, how his mother, Mary, was fierce; how his mother stood firm in less-than-ideal circumstances, how his mother set her face “like flint” (Isaiah 50:7, Luke 9:51) and said yes to God (Luke 1:38), whatever may come. What we see in Jesus, we have seen first in his mother.

One author, Debie Thomas, writes that Jesus as a mother, as a mother hen in particular, does not offer “the absence of danger”. Danger is there; Herod is a villain; he is a fox; he has done terrible things and will do more of them. What Jesus as mother offers is “the fullness of his unguarded, open-hearted, wholly vulnerable self in the face of all that threatens and scares us. What [Jesus as our mother] gives us is his own body, his own life.”⁴

If you’ve ever seen a mother hen in action, it’s a fierce thing to behold. Warm and cuddly sometimes, but when the mother senses danger, you do not want to be around. When a mother senses danger, she will immediately gather her young behind her and under her wings, such that they cannot be seen or sensed by the predator. When needed, the mother hen will also lift up and spread out her wings, the chicks being visible but directly behind her,

³ Shiao Chong, “Biblical Maternal Images for God”, *The Junia Project*, May 7, 2016, <https://juniaproject.com/biblical-maternal-images-for-god/>

⁴ Debie Thomas, “The Way of the Hen”, *Journey with Jesus*, March 17, 2019, https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2119&fbclid=IwAR2YT4_FY93vBVmAuhhlb8ACsBjPyKb4vSVsNr-utYWfYufz2aKs-ahbw6M

and by spreading her wings, she makes herself larger yet also much more vulnerable. With wings spread, she will go after the predator, rushing ahead, her own life in peril, and though it might not make much sense—we, like the Pharisees to Jesus, might want to say, “Don’t do that!” (Luke 13:31)—she instinctively knows no other way. We might ask her, “How did you do it? Why did you do it?” And she would say, “I had to. It’s all I know.”

What our God knows and yearns for, just like a mother, is to gather us close, protect us, hold us, and name us “Beloved”. God as mother cannot necessarily prevent danger. Danger is a reality, which Jesus names in this situation. What God our mother gives us is “wings spread open, heart exposed, shade and warmth and shelter at the ready. What [Jesus our mother] promises—at great risk to himself—is the making of his very being into a place of refuge and return for his children...all of his children, even the ones” who are doing and saying the most vile things against him.⁵ We might imagine that God is more like a lion than a female bird. We might imagine that the Messiah who is to come, who is coming, is like a strongman. We might indeed look to men and assume their power, assume that that is what power looks like, that’s how power is defined, that’s who God is, but Jesus, with his life on the line, claims for himself an image and identity as mother. He takes upon himself a unique vulnerability and is not defined by that, is not to be pitied, but says and shows us that that vulnerability, openness, shelter, and refuge at all costs—that is who God is. It is what God does. And there is no other option.

So, with God as our mother, with Jesus our mother hen, longing to gather the people of Jerusalem in his time under the shadow of his wings, longing to call each of us close, what do we do? Do we gather, do we come close, or is there something within that keeps us at a distance? Is our fear truly too large to behold? Wherever we might find ourselves, however we might fear, the truth is that God is our mother, calling for us, calling us home, her body and her heart are on the line, and yet her desire is fixed on us. She will never stop calling us, gathering us, protecting us, guiding us, teaching us, saying, “I love you.”⁶ She cannot and would not do it any other way.

⁵ Thomas, *Ibid.*

⁶ Inspired by Thomas, *Ibid.*