

“One Thing I Ask”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
March 13, 2022

---

Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18  
Psalm 27  
Luke 13:31-35

Tell me one thing you are afraid of... anyone, anything... (waits)

In my ministry, I have heard of all kinds of fears: on mission trips I have heard about fears of spiders, fears of encounters with people who may think differently, and, well— one year, someone’s fear of flying on airplanes actually influenced *where* we decided to have our mission trip.

I have heard of fears that you will never find someone to love as a life partner. I have heard of fears that your marriage could end.

I have heard fears that you as a parent can’t give your child what they need.

I have heard fears of what COVID can do to you.

I have heard fears that you will not be able to legally stay in this country of your choosing.

I have heard fears that your reproductive choice will be taken from you or from your children.

I have heard fears that your depression will never end.

I have heard fears of what will happen if you come out as queer or trans, and I have also heard fears of what happens if you *don’t* come out.

I have heard fears about global warming, fears of your own complicity in that crisis.

I have heard fears that you won’t be able to afford a car, medicine, food, a home.

I have heard fears that you will never be enough.

I have heard fears that the color of your skin could make a traffic stop turn into a tragedy.

I have heard of fears that your body will break down or become unreliable. That someone you love will die... That *you* will die...

I have heard of fears that God is not listening or not even there.

As your pastor, let me confess to you, some of these fears you have are ones that I share, too.

“The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?” the Psalmist announced... and then went on to mention the sorts of things they won’t be afraid of: when evildoers assail me to devour my flesh; when an army encamps against me; when false witnesses rise up against me, breathing out violence... and then the Psalmist goes on to repeat, maybe trying to convince himself: “of whom shall I be afraid?”

Well, according to the Pharisees, Jesus **should** fear Herod. Mind you— they weren’t wrong; already Herod had arranged for the beheading of John the Baptist. And he came from *that* family of Herods— Herod of a generation back orchestrated the killing of all the male children born in Bethlehem after he was told the Messiah was to be born there. Here, the Pharisees could have been offering this warning to Jesus to control him; but they also could have been offering the warning because they genuinely cared about Jesus. Pharisees, as much as they were disparaged in the gospels, were always part of Jesus’ inner circle, and in Acts, they are mentioned among the early participants in the newly forming church.

Sometimes, the people who love you think that they are protecting you by catering to, activating, or enabling your fears. I remember my first year out of college, when I lived in Manhattan, I would often talk on the phone with my mom, who was in Atlanta, before going out at night. “Where are you going?” my mom would ask. “I’m going downtown to meet some friends for dinner.” “How are you getting there?” she’d ask me. “I’m taking the subway— the same way I ALWAYS get around Manhattan.” And then I could hear the worry in my mother’s troubled voice as she responded, “Oh...alone?” (This may be hard to understand, but I remember the way I heard about New York City when I grew up in leafy Atlanta was that it was a dirty and dangerous place, with rude, rushed people. When I visited for the first time as a teenager, I realized that New York wasn’t the dirty, dangerous place I was told it was; the people, even when rushed, showed a tender humanity. Back then I thought, “It would be cool to live here someday.” But then I also knew that I could *never* marry a New Yorker.)

The reason the Psalmist was emboldened in the face of fear was that they imagined one thing: “*One thing* I asked of the Lord, that I will seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.” I like to think the Psalmist found this home, even in the face of enormous threat.

I see Jesus in Luke’s gospel as longing to offer that same home to a people who aren’t sure whether they want to receive it. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

Contemplate this: “Jesus as a mother hen whose chicks don’t want her. Though she stands with her wings wide open, offering welcome, belonging, and shelter, her children refuse to come home to her. Her wings — her arms — are empty.” Debie Thomas describes, “This, in other words, is a mother bereft. A mother in mourning. A mother struggling with failure and futility.”

Think about it: if Herod is a fox prowling about, would you *really* want to take shelter under a hen's wings? Maybe the Pharisees were right: cut your losses, go run; go hide. Do *not* reveal yourself to be part of this mission of Jesus: to offer release from those held captive by demons or oppression; to heal those who are sick; to create a home for those who had no place. While there were some who were trying to create a safe home by hiding who they are and fitting within the expectations of empire, Jesus was instead creating a home that might not have been *safe*, at least not according to empire's standards, but which gathered in those who were outsiders, expanding the boundary of who could be named as Welcome, and who could be named Beloved. It's remarkable just how wide those wings could spread.

God's love rests under the canopy of a hen's wings. It is certainly a vulnerable place to be. Jesus knew something about vulnerability, and he was willing to enter it. Instead of leaving, and shoring up his safety, Jesus set himself on a journey toward Jerusalem, the city that killed its prophets. Luke's gospel seems to believe that Jesus already knew he would die there. I wonder how heartbroken Jesus must have been, standing there, wings open, waiting to see who would find shelter with him.

Did any of you see a photograph last week of a dozen or so empty strollers, sitting and waiting on a train platform? The same week that Russia bombed a maternity hospital, several train stations in Poland near the border with Ukraine filled with these empty strollers waiting to receive refugee children and cradle them in safety, giving their mothers' tired arms a rest. *The Washington Post* reported, and these Polish parents understood at a core level, this truth: as much as planes and ammunition are urgent supplies needed in defense from war, so are strollers, which can grant relief from exhausted bodies that left with only the clothes on their backs and the children in their arms, strollers which hold children born into war; strollers which can be substitute for a bed when you are on the move, strollers, whose "whirring motion can make a baby stop crying, and make her head tilt heavy against the waterproof nylon until she falls asleep and her breath comes out whisper-soft." (Monica Heiss, "What Mothers Know About War" in *The Washington Post*, March 9, 2022)

It's true, the foxes of the world will not be moved by such offerings; they never have been. But it speaks a message to everyone else: instead of playing by the rules of the fox, ***we can make different rules.*** You see, it is not the destruction or domination brought on by war, greed, or violence that makes you god-like. It is in the vulnerability of cradling a child that you become more like God— particularly when you go out of your way to love and protect a child not your own. Who is allowed under God's wing? Yes, they can cover Ukrainian refugees. They also stretch wide enough to cover the mother of the young, Russian military conscript who calls with desperation in her voice, asking, "Whose door should I knock on to get my child back?" Jesus showed us that God's promises, once made long ago to one people and one land, have stretched wide enough to include a number as vast as the stars of the sky. What would it mean to settle into that be-longing?

We are still going to be afraid. The world is a fearful place, moreso for some than for others. But we have a choice: will fear be our refuge, or will love be our refuge? Honestly? I am not always sure which I am ready to choose. I am not always prepared for how differently the world would look if we chose love over fear. But I will start with gratitude for what Jesus chose, and ask for one thing: that I might live in the house of the Lord, too.