

Good Shepherd Episcopal Church

The Episcopal Church, Granbury, Texas

February 28, 2010

II Lent

Luke 13:3135

A few years ago Cybil Shepherd, herself the mother of twins and a native of Memphis, was asked to name the twin hippopotami born in the Memphis zoo. The only hitch was that the mother hippo, Julie, wouldn't let anyone close enough to the babies to determine their sex. Apparently the two 40 pound babies paddled or walked just under Julie and nobody but nobody, wanted to upset a momma who weighs more than a luxury limo by getting too close to her newborns.

I don't know exactly what a hippo does to protect her young but I suspect it wouldn't be pleasant.

Wisdom dictated that everybody wait. So there was a long delay in naming Julie's new babies. It certainly didn't seem to matter a whole lot to Julie. She continued to care for her babies: feeding them, protecting them, keeping them close to herself and away from danger. And the babies, untroubled by their nameless state, didn't stray from mom. They knew a good thing when they saw it: that good thing being a two ton, funny looking, grey and pink creature who always seemed to provide them with just what they needed. Why should they stray?

In some respects, hippos, cats, and just about any other animal you'd care to mention, exhibit more sense than people. Their young, at least, have sense enough to stay close to momma; close to food, protection, warmth, and moms nurturing.

You won't find kittens turning away from the warm fur they know so well. Chicks don't stray far from the protection of the hen's wings. To do so would be counter to their nature counter to the natural order as God created it.

Even the least intelligent animals offspring stay close, through instinct, to the one who gave them life; they cry out to the one who nurtures and protects them, but human beings? ... now that's another story. We human beings often stray. It seems that only the children of

God exhibit the unnatural behavior of turning away from the love and protection of the loving Father who made them.

"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!"

In those words of Jesus we hear the sound of God's sorrowing. We hear God's heart breaking. With the tender overwhelming love of a mother, God loves his children. And yet, says Jesus, the children have strayed: they have killed the prophets and stoned those sent to them. As a mother hen spreads her wings over her brood, so God would spread protective wings over his people. But contrary to nature, unrepentantly, His children turn away.

What chicks and kittens would not do could not do the children of God have done over and over again: seeming to count the love and protection of God as insignificant, choosing instead to go their own way. How could such a thing be? How could the children of Israel have been so foolish, so unnaturally rebellious as to turn away from the warm wings offered to them? ... especially when those wings had brought them safely through so many difficulties. Especially when God had delivered them time and again from their enemies, and given them so much that was the envy of the people around them.

Hard questions these. But harder yet is this question: How could we do such a thing? How can we be so foolish or behave so unnaturally as to turn away from the protective love of God?

There are times when even the strongest among us feel desperate about our lack of security. We yearn for protective wings over us but we have placed ourselves at a distance from the comforting presence of God. Can any one of us say that we have never had a troubled night or felt the a bit of dread while confronting the reality of death or of old age as it drew near... either to us or to one we love?

Who among us has not felt the fear that comes with loneliness; who has not worried about their children's future; who has not agonized over the security of our jobs and finances?

Is there anyone who has not experienced the pain of a relationship gone sour? And what about the pain of knowing that we participated in the failure of love and its' passing?

Who can say that there have not been mornings when we've been ashamed to look in the mirror at our own reflection because of something we've said, or done; ashamed because of how we've hated, envied, lusted, or lied while we wandered far from God's wings?

"How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

God's lament rings disturbingly in our ears because we, too, "were not willing." We would not listen to the call to trust, we would not accept the invitation to come home and to experience God's comfort. We would not trust our worries, our pain, our sin to the wings of God, preferring instead to peck here and there in the hope that we would stumble upon some morsel that would somehow satisfy us; or at least numb our minds, and take our thoughts away from the realization that we, too, have wandered far from the protecting presence of God.

I think there is a Sufi story that tells of a disciple whose marriage was in trouble and so he sought help from his master. His master told him "You must learn to listen to your wife". The man took this advice to heart. He returned after a month to say that he had learned to listen to every word his wife was saying. Good, said the master with a smile. "Now go home and listen to every word she isn't saying".

We do not need to keep our minds awash in the sea of today's troubles: the irritations, the hassles, the problems of work and school.

We do not need to come home and numb our minds with television, alcohol or other drugs ... or try to divert ourselves with household chores, hobbies, even churchly commitments anything and everything to keep from thinking about the distance and silence of God in our daily lives.

God is speaking to us in words that he does not say, as much as he speaks to us in the words that he does say.

How often would I have gathered **you** to Myself, but **you** would not come Listen hear the invitation that God is speaking, accept His

protection and holy love.

Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Even now the Mother Hen would gather us in the shadow of Her outstretched wings, warm and secure next to the beating Heart of God. Even now God calls us to come, to trust, to rely on His protection and experience His nurturing guidance throughout all our days.

This is not the first time God has called to us. He doesn't wait to extend his offer until we have nowhere else to turn. He calls to us when we are prospering to remember from where our prosperity arose. He calls us to Himself to give thanks, and to share with our brothers and sisters in all holiness and righteousness.

He calls us in our times of joy and certainty to acknowledge his part in it, and to go to those who are in despair, sharing with them the gift of hope. He calls to us in our times of sin, urging us to repent and to return to Him in the confidence that we will be forgiven and that we can start anew.

God calls to us at all times and in all places. The first official call was issued long ago when we were born anew in the waters of baptism, in the blood of Christ, into his family, his holy brood.

Through our baptisms, God births us and pledges to us the fierce devotion, love and protection that we see dimly mirrored in the behavior of the animal world.

Animals will protect and care for their young only for a time; God pledges His loving care for eternity.

His is true security, true protection. Instead of some empty promise that nothing bad will ever happen to us, His promise assures us that whatever does happen to us, whatever pain or problems plague us, whatever fear we may face, whatever sin may assail us, we will never be found defenseless or alone. For we stand under the protection of God's wings, shaded by God's forgiveness, strengthened by the Body and Blood given for us.

I read a young man's story. His name was Ike. He told about the day the hen house burned down on his grandpa's place. Ike had arrived just

in time to help put out the last of the fire. As he and his grandfather sorted through the ruins, they came upon one dead hen lying near what had been the door of the hen house. Her top feathers were scorched, blackened by the fire's heat, her neck limp. Ike bent down to pick up the dead hen, and as he did, he felt something move. Four of the hen's chicks came scurrying out from beneath her burnt body. The chicks had survived because they were insulated by the shelter of the hens wings as she died to protect and save them.

"How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings..."

This morning, again, Jesus Christ calls you and me. He calls us to the protecting shelter of His wings. He calls you and me to the safety of his arms stretched out for us on the cross.

He calls us to trust Him, no matter what our fears, no matter what our hurts, or troubles; to trust that his outstretched arms are strong enough, his wings broad enough to keep us in safety.