There was a zoology professor who was famous for being extremely difficult. Every year students failed his course at a remarkable rate. One year, an ambitious young woman took his class intending to prove she could get an "A." Throughout the year she did very well, but then it came time for the final exam. To prepare, she studied every night for three weeks memorizing all she could about every animal on the planet. But then, as she entered the classroom on the morning of the exam, she saw 100 pictures of different birds hanging on the walls, and only the feet were visible. The professor announced that the exam would be to look at each set of feet and identify the genus and species of each bird. The young woman was furious. She got up from her seat went to the professor's desk and said "You have got to be kidding me. What a stupid test! How could anyone know a bird by looking at the feet? I refuse to take this ridiculous examination." The professor said, "Young lady, your attitude is unacceptable. I plan to report you to chancellor's office. What is your name?" The young woman threw her foot up on the professor's desk and said, "I don't know, you tell me!"

A few years ago, during the season of Lent, I read a book by Debbie Blue entitled Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to the Birds of the Bible. The book was surprisingly good and after reading it, I became obsessed with birds. I found myself constantly talking about them to the point that other ministers started to pick on me. They'd say, "There he goes again, talking about birds!" At Christmas that year, I gave everyone a copy of "the bird book," and eventually those who read it began to understand why I suddenly fell in love with birds. I can't identify birds any better than I could before I read the book, and that's because the book isn't really about birds—it's about our relationship with God. The birds are merely symbols, signs, images, pictures, and portals into the mystery of divinity and humanity. In the Bible, birds are metaphors for God and human beings, which means that each biblical bird reveals something different about us, and our relationship to the Creator.

Our story today contains the only occasion where Jesus ever compared himself to a bird; and when he did, it was not a sparrow, or a hawk, or a raven, or a dove, or even a rooster—it was a mother hen. Of all the birds Jesus could have chosen to describe himself, why did he choose the hen? As Debbie Blue says, "It is a bit shocking that of all the birds Jesus might have identified himself with, he picked the chicken. He might have chosen something glorious—the splendid fairy wren, the lammergeyer, a sunbird, a spider catcher might have been a nice metaphor, a bird with a beautiful song or huge strong wings. But out of all the dazzling colorful possibilities—he compares himself to a hen. It's a loving image, but it's not especially dignified. The chicken is not a magnificent bird—it is the most domesticated animal there is.” While it may be shocking, Jesus' choice of the hen was not completely unprecedented. In the apocryphal text 2 Ezra 1:28, it says “Have I not entreated you as a father his sons or a mother her daughters or a nurse her children, so that you should be my people and I your God...Did I not gather you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings?”

We may not be familiar with this apocryphal Jewish text, but Jesus most likely would have been. The image of God as a mother hen, gathering the people of Israel as chicks under her wings, had precedent in the writings of the first century Jewish community. And yet, the most obvious reason that Jesus used the metaphor of the hen was to create a contrast between himself and the fox that went by the name King Herod. Our story begins with some Pharisees who came to Jesus and said, “Get out of here, for Herod wants to kill you!” Now it would be easy for us to doubt the motives of the Pharisees in this story, but it is possible...
that they were genuinely concerned for Jesus’ wellbeing. Not all the Pharisees were opposed to Jesus’ ministry and this group who approached Jesus were a select group who may have simply been trying to help Jesus avoid being killed. They certainly had reason to worry. This was the same Herod who murdered Jesus’ cousin and mentor, John the Baptist, and offered his head up on a silver platter. Now he had his sights on Jesus and was threatening to have him killed.

It is disappointing that many Christians today believe that Jesus was merely spiritual and not political, because it is pretty obvious that he was both. You don’t have to read a book by Marcus Borg and John Crossan to see that Jesus’ entire ministry was incredibly political. Wisdom teachers, sages, and spiritual gurus do not get hunted down and murdered unless they are a threat to those in political power. Prophets get hunted down and murdered, and Jesus was a prophet who preached that a new kingdom was coming that would turn the order and values of the current kingdom upside down. As the current king of Judea, Herod saw Jesus as a threat to his kingdom. He wasn’t trying to kill Jesus for the spiritual crime of blasphemy. Herod didn’t care about blasphemy—he was trying to kill Jesus on the charge of sedition! But killing Jesus outright, as he did with John, could have incited a political revolution, so Herod tried another tactic—a scare tactic. He tried to intimidate Jesus by spreading the word that he was going to kill him. The purpose of this threat was to strike fear in the hearts of his followers, and shut down his ministry. Like many political rulers before and after him, Herod knew that fear is a powerful force.

Back in the 90s many were afraid that there was a direct link between violence on television and violence in real life, so George Gerbner, a professor from Penn University, studied the link for ten years. In his research, however, instead of finding a direct link between television and violence, he found a strong association between television and fear. “People who watch more television”, he said, “are more likely to believe their neighborhood is unsafe, to assume crime rates are rising, and to overestimate their odds of becoming a victim.” We live today in a culture of fear. In a free democratic capitalist nation you cannot force people to do very much, so you have to find the power to persuade and motivate them, and fear is an incredibly powerful motivator. That is why politicians from Herod all the way up to today have used fear to incite people to act in a particular way—the fear of crime, fear of death, fear of losing our rights, the fear of drugs, fear of others, fear of losing our way of life, the fear of terrorism, fear of economic disaster, fear of losing the American dream—just to name a few.

But politicians are not the only ones who use fear to motivate and manipulate people. Some preachers use the fear of judgment, hell, and eternal damnation to try and scare people into following Jesus. Marketers use fear to sell us their products. The media uses fear to sell their stories. Everyone is trying to captivate us, persuade us, motivate us, and manipulate our behavior using the power of fear. However, in stark contrast, the overwhelming message of scripture is “do not be afraid.” Some Christians fall into the trap of thinking that the opposite of faith is doubt or disbelief—but doubt and disbelief are a necessary part of faith. The opposite of faith is not doubt, it is fear. Throughout the bible, fear is the ever-present antagonist of faith. It is fear, and not doubt, that leads us into the way of sin, evil, and death. I know I’m sounding a little like Yoda right now when he said, “Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering.” Wise words speaks Yoda. Fear will almost always lead us away from the light and away from the path we should be taking. Fear is often what keeps us from doing the work that God has called us to do.

The most amazing thing about our story this morning, is that Jesus was not afraid. Even though King Herod was trying to terrify him and terrorize him, Jesus did not allow himself to be overcome by the power of fear. Herod’s threats were very real—he had murdered before and he would murder again, but Jesus was not afraid of pain, or suffering, or death, or Herod (for that matter) and he would not allow the work that he had been called to do to be deterred by fear. Faced with the threat of death, he called Herod a “fox”—a crafty, ruthless, and vicious animal. The fox was Jewish rabbinical term of derision for someone who was known to be a habitually deceptive and nefarious creature of low cunning. Jesus basically told the Pharisees, “You go tell that fox that I am not afraid of him. He can't scare me with his threats and I’m
certainly not going to stop my mission because he wants to kill me. I'm going to keep on liberating, healing, and reconciling people—and I'm going to do it today, and tomorrow, and the next day—all the way to Jerusalem and he can kill me there like did all the prophets."

Jesus was not afraid and neither fear of death, nor Herod, nor Rome, nor anything else was going to stop him from doing what God had called him to do. That is what true faith looks like—it looks like courage, bravery, and strength. At the time, some of Jesus’ followers probably hoped he would launch into a revolutionary speech inciting violence against Herod or the Roman occupation. They were ready for Jesus to give us a bold metaphor of courage and power that they could sink their teeth into—a masculine image of some kind—like a military soldier, a rock, a sword, a spear, or a powerful animal that could devour the fox in a single bite—so they could overcome the power of fear. Instead, Jesus chose to compare himself to a chicken—a mother hen—the very thing that foxes kill. Hens can be fiercely protective of their chicks. They will growl, shriek, puff out their feathers, and peck at anyone or anything that might try to hurt their young. But they are no match for a fox. The hen is a sacrificial bird. They spread their wings wide and make themselves exposed and vulnerable in order to gather their chicks under their wings for safety from weather and predators.

In a famous article on this story Barbara Brown Taylor said, “Given the number of animals available, it is curious that Jesus chooses a hen. What about the mighty eagle of Exodus, or Hosea’s steady leopard? What about the proud lion of Judah, mowing down his enemies with a roar? Compared to any of those, a mother hen does not inspire much confidence. No wonder some of the chicks decided to go with the fox. But a hen is what Jesus chooses, which—if you think about it—is pretty typical of him. He is always turning things upside down, so that children and peasants wind up on top while kings and scholars land on the bottom....So of course he chooses a chicken, which is about as far from a fox as you can get. That way the options become very clear: you can live by licking your chops or you can die protecting the chicks....Jesus won’t be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first.”

In a surprise turn, we discover that Jesus’ response to Herod’s threats and the problem of fear was not to become more manly, or masculine, or macho. And it was not even to become more fatherly, paternal, or patriarchal—it was to become a mother hen. It is alarming for some of us to hear Jesus use a feminine image to describe himself, but like the prophets before him, Jesus often used Hebrew metaphors for God to paint a vivid picture of his love for the people of Israel. Feminine images of God are scattered all throughout the Hebrew Bible. Many of us are familiar with Lady Wisdom (Sophia) in Proverbs 8, but in Isaiah 42 and 49, God is compared to a mother giving birth and feeding her children. In Hosea 13, God is compared to a fierce mother bear, looking for her lost cubs, and in Deuteronomy 32 God is compared to “a mother eagle who stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings.” The Psalms confirm this poetic image five different times, depicting God as a mother bird who shelters her children Israel under the refuge of her wings.

As a result of the church’s captivity to patriarchy, we have often neglected the feminine image of God. Few have been open to theological descriptions and depictions of God as our mother. There are very few liturgies, doxologies, prayers, or hymns with this theme. But in the 14th century a Christian mystic Julian of Norwich was a voice crying out in the wilderness who said, “As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our mother. And Jesus, our savior, is also our Mother, in whom we are endlessly born and who feeds us from his body like a mother through the sacrament of communion.” We need the image of God as our Mother and Christ as our Mother, because when we only have the ability to describe Christ or God with the traditional male language, we limit our imaginations, and we limit God. Using the language of Mother is not just an attempt to make God more accessible to women—we are all impoverished when we can only imagine God in narrow masculine terms. We need a broader understanding of God and Lent (this season) is
the perfect time to reimagine the picture of God that we have so that we can experience the divine in new and deeper ways.

When Jesus was painting the picture of himself as a mother hen gathering her brood under the refuge of her wings, it was during a lament over the city of Jerusalem. The city that murdered prophets was a city captivated by the fear of Herod the fox—a fear that kept God’s people scattered and distant from one another in ways that they could not understand. The image of Jesus gathering the people of Israel under his wings like a mother hen was an image of peace and reconciliation of the divisions that existed in the holy city. What makes Jesus’ lament so heartbreaking is that even though he desired deeply to gather the children of Jerusalem were simply too afraid to find shelter under the shadow of the mother hen. I wonder what Jesus would say about the Queen city, Charlotte, if he looked over us today? I imagine he might offer a similar heartbreaking lament over his children in our city who he longs to gather like a mother hen, but who are divided from one another in segregated schools, neighborhoods, and churches, and who are still too afraid to be gathered together.

How do we overcome the fear that divides us? We cannot do it by becoming foxes like Herod—foxes will only create more violence and violence cannot kill the power of fear. Violence just creates more fear and fear in turn begets more violence. It is a vicious cycle. The only way for us to overcome the power of fear in our world is to follow in the footsteps of our mother who was vulnerable enough to offer peace, healing, reconciliation, and vulnerability. We will not be given swords, or guns, or clubs, or sticks to fight against the foxes of the world—but if we can open up our wings like mother hen with the desire to gather together the poor children of the world, then we will find the faith we need to continue the mission and the courage say, “Go tell those foxes that we are not afraid. They can’t scare us with threats and we will not stop our mission. We have work to do and we will keep on liberating people, healing people, and reconciling people, today, tomorrow, and the next day...until our time is done or the kingdom comes.” If the mother hen is our light, if the mother hen is our salvation, and if the mother hen is our refuge and strength, then whom shall we fear? Amen.