

How many of you saw the story in Thursday's Star Tribune, about a billboard that was put up along a road near St. Cloud? It said, "Catholic Charities Resettles Islamists: EVIL or INSANITY?" In response Catholic Charities contacted the billboard company to say that they are not involved in that kind of work. Since the billboard was inaccurate, it was taken down.

When I read this at the breakfast table, I remember thinking, "Now there's a profile in courage." Instead of proclaiming the Gospel demand for us to be involved in helping all the homeless and oppressed, this church-related organization in effect said, "Don't blame us. We're not doing that resettlement."

I'm sure that they would argue that they need to receive support from many people for their work, so it's pointless to alienate public opinion unnecessarily. Especially in the current political climate it can be dangerous to be seen walking certain paths.

All this should point us directly to today's gospel lesson where the issue of worldly power versus obedience to God is central. Jesus was journeying through Galilee toward Jerusalem, where he knew that the ultimate confrontation with the powers-that-be was waiting for him. A group of Pharisees came to warn him that Herod was seeking to kill him. His reply was "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.'"

Why should deeds of compassion have been a problem for Herod? It was because Jesus' actions undermined the fundamental powers of those at the top. Herod and Rome ruled through fear and darkness. Their power was that of death – not just physical death, but the death of hope, the extinguishing of lamps lifted high to shine into hidden corners, ultimately the death of trust in the love of God.

The power of Jesus' work was life - not just to heal broken bodies and minds, but to heal the terrible distance between people caught in the teeth of the fox and the reality of God's love. This indeed could call down Herod's wrath.

The words Jesus speaks over Jerusalem are a lament both for that city and for us who are so often scattered from our true home. We are not

only running away from the protection of the mother hen, but are actually running toward the fox. It is the fox's cunning message to all of us, the attractiveness and false promise of sin, that pulls us away from our home in God.

The world tells us that it is essential to be as powerful as possible because it is dangerous out there. We can only be protected by wealth, by weapons available everywhere, by walls of many types and dimensions to keep strangers away from us, by subtle barriers to keep Blacks and Hispanics and First Nations Peoples within certain parts of the economic system where they can't compete with us.

Jay Hornbacher and I were talking a couple days ago about how this carefully crafted message of our current politics is designed to appeal to the most primitive part of our brain – what scientists call The Reptilian Brain. It is the deep and ancient part of our nervous system that evolved to warn us of danger, to push us to the road of fighting or fleeing.

It's probably an important capacity to have in a world of sabre-tooth tigers. But without evolution toward greater maturity, with the ability to choose trust and to love altruistically, this voice of constant warning will have us living in isolated darkness.

For Christians the mature call is toward God's will for our true safety. Jesus the mother hen longs to gather us under sheltering wings for protection. Because make no mistake – if we insist on running around like lost baby chicks, listening to the world's drumbeat of fear telling us to make ourselves secure, the fox can at any moment turn and rend us to pieces.

In Jesus' lament over Jerusalem - and over us – we can hear the depths of God's suffering when we refuse the maternal love that She constantly holds out to us. That refusal to hear God's longing for our well-being is the very heart of sin.

In the season of Lent, we focus on repentance and forgiveness. But this is not simply repentance for individual acts of injury or selfishness or malice - things done or left undone as we say in the confession. It is more profoundly about our rejection of God's love. Lent is a time to recognize the need to turn around and find our way home again,

Barbara Brown Taylor writes about this in a description of the city of Jerusalem, and a place that those of us leaving this afternoon for the Holy Land will have the chance to see. She says:

On the western slope of the Mount of Olives, just across the Kidron Valley from the city, sits a small chapel called Dominus Flevit. The name comes from the tradition, that it was here Jesus wept over the city that had refused his ministrations.

Inside the chapel, the altar is centered before a high arched window that looks out over the city. Iron grillwork divides the view into sections, so that on a sunny day the effect is that of a stained glass window. The difference is that this subject is alive. It is not some artist's rendering of the holy city but the city itself, with the Dome of the Rock in the bottom left corner and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the middle.

Down below, on the front of the altar, is a mosaic of a white hen with a golden halo around her head. Her red comb resembles a crown, and her wings are spread wide to shelter the pale yellow chicks that crowd around her feet. They look happy to be there. The hen looks ready to spit fire if anyone comes near her babies.

This depiction is rimmed with red words in Latin. Translated into English they read, "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!" That last phrase is set outside the circle, in a pool of red underneath the chicks' feet: you were not willing.

Jesus will not be a powerful king of the jungle in this 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.

And as we know Jesus will be killed first, hung on a cross to complete our healing. It is a costly kind of safety which we are shown here – a safety of sacrifice and giving. In Lent we are invited back to the only real home we can have, to this refuge, under the sheltering wings of Jesus our Mother, the one who chooses to be given up for our salvation.