

“Come Closer”
Sermon for the 2nd Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2010 – The Rev. Torrence Harman
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Phillipians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

The fox and the hen. It sounds as if I am about to launch into one of Aesop’s famous fables. But we are here, instead, in the Bible, a literal Biblical barnyard.

We have a fox on one hand and the vision of baby chicks on the other. One thing stands between them, a mother hen.

Baby chicks don’t notice the danger lurking nearby. They are just busily being baby chicks. They don’t know how vulnerable they are. But if they don’t wander off too far away, Mother Hen’s voice, her squark and beating wings, will bring them scuttling back to her. She stands tall, puffs out her feathers, fluffs out her wings – a haven, a refuge, for her children.

The difference between life and death – the mother’s voice – calling her children back to her, to home, to safety under her wings.

Reminds us of the passages about sheep and the shepherd. The true shepherd watches out for his sheep and will put himself between his sheep and the wolf, danger stalking nearby ready to snatch a lamb away.

One thing stands between the sheep and the wolf – the shepherd.

The difference between life and death – the shepherd’s call – back to the fold, to the safety of the shepherd’s presence.

The theme that seems to wind its way among our passages this morning, in Genesis, the Psalm and Luke, is one of protection, one of shelter.

“Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield,” the Lord says to Abraham in a vision. And so Abraham gathers the flocks around him, human and animal, and continues his journey in a renewed covenant, a renewed relationship with God – towards God’s promised dwelling place for the Israelites – the promised land.

The psalmist turns to his Lord, over and over again in so many of the Psalms, calling for help and protection. This morning the psalmist’s cry is strong and confident:

“The LORD is my light and my salvation:
whom then shall I fear?
the LORD is the strength of my life;
of whom then shall I be afraid?”

How many times have we heard the phrase, from angels and others in our Sunday readings: “Do not be afraid!” Implicit in the psalmist’s response, “I will not be afraid. I will trust you, Lord.”

He speaks confidently from a deep place of knowing inside of him – a knowing based on past experiences, close calls with his enemies and those who seek to destroy him. He remembers who brought him through those times before.

Yesterday, we celebrated the life of the Rev. Sydney Swann, a former rector of St. Mary’s Whitechapel and Trinity. Some time before he died he chose the hymns and the scripture passages for his funeral. Psalm 46 was read in unison yesterday by the people who came to remember him. Listen to the Psalmist’s voice:

“God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though
the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in
the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble
with its tumult.” (*Psalm 46:1-3*)

How often this happens in our lives? Times when things are changing around us, when the mountains we thought could not be shaken, do; when the waters of life rage and foam around us; when what has felt rock solid and secure in our lives trembles.

The Psalm ends with a resounding positive – a view of what is available in those times – a place of shelter from the storm:

“The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.” (*Psalm 46:7*)

Syd Swann, as his children, friends and parishioners at various churches in two Dioceses knew and experienced him, was a person of strength, of quiet purpose, a maker of peace, a giver of a sense of security. He ushered his flocks (both family and church ones) through some difficult times. Before death, knowing that people would gather around at the time after his death, knowing that there would be a “congregation” to hear, through him, once again an ancient and sustaining message, Syd Swann asked us to say together words that had probably sustained him throughout his life:

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear”

He would probably chuckle – a deep voiced chuckle – if we asked him. “So, did you see yourself like a little chick in the barnyard, scuttling others under the Savior’s wings, leading the

little chick pact to safety?” Maybe, maybe not. One of his children described him as a shepherd, knowing deeply who his Shepherd was.

Our voices from the past this morning talk of “dwelling places.” Abraham’s vision of a promised dwelling place – the promised land – is renewed by the Lord, and Abraham and Sarah will trek on with the gathered Israelites, the flocks, with God’s presence as near as a voice away, a dream away – but a very present help.

The Psalmist today speaks of his desire for a dwelling place:

“One thing have I asked of the LORD;
one thing I seek;
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days
of my life
for in the day of trouble he shall keep me safe in his shelter.”

Our journey towards the dwelling, the shelter, the promised place is not a geographic one measured in so many miles across a desert, through a wilderness or over mountains, or in feet across a barnyard. It is a journey of the heart. The dwelling place, the shelter is not simply some yet-to-come heavenly spot we must wait to find after what we consider our end – our physical death. The dwelling place, the shelter, the refuge, the haven under a feathered wing is a part of our here-and-now – very present, very available. And the promise? As we travel the here-and-now, the yet-to-come opens up to us.

Our reluctance to die to some things – like ignorance, fear, isolation, pride, a sense we can do it on our own, thank you, of ignoring lurking danger, of rejecting the call to come back within the safety and protection of the Source of our life. These are the things that stand in the way of an abundant life – very present, very available – lived not in fear but in faith.

The God of Abram waits, the God of the psalmist waits, the shepherd waits, the mother hen waits, fluffing her feathers, raising her broad wings and flapping them in our direction. They are saying: “Come, find shelter, dwell close to me, close to my voice and heart and my promises for you. I will enfold you and be with you – all the days of your life.” The shepherd says, the mother hen says, “I will stand between you and danger, whatever wants to devour you, diminish you, snatch you away from me. Turn to me, open your ears to my voice, your eyes to my presence. My promise: I will be with you all the way. I will be with you always.”