

Gathered Under His Wings
February 28, 2010, Lent 2

If you've been watching the Winter Olympics, you might have seen the women's figure skating competition. The gold was taken by South Korean Kim Nu-wa, and the silver by Japanese skater Mao Asada. But I was even more impressed with the story of Canadian skater Joannie Rochette, whose mother suddenly died last Sunday after a heart attack at age 55, two days before her daughter had to skate the short program. She was able to place herself in position that night to win a medal, and this week she performed the long program beautifully and took the bronze medal.

The interviewer asked her after her performance how she was able to do what she did. This is what she said: "I'm so proud not only for the fight I gave out there, not only for the performance, but also for the way I could control my emotions." She thanked a lot of people, and then she said this: "The thing I'm most proud of is that I could step out on that ice and be tough- because that's what my mom taught me all her life."

Joannie Rochette had been training for that moment all her life. She knew how she'd been raised by her mother, she knew who she was, she knew what she needed to do, and she did it.

During these Lenten Sundays we have stories of Jesus on his way to the cross. He is on the journey to his suffering and his death and his resurrection. He knows who he is, he knows who he belongs to, he knows what his mission is. And he will not let anyone deter him from that mission.

So in today's gospel, we have some religious leaders, some Pharisees, coming to Jesus and actually trying to help him. Jesus is still in Galilee, up north of Jerusalem, where the Sea of Galilee is. But ever since chapter 9 of Luke, he has been on his way to Jerusalem. In chapter 9, v.51, Luke says, "When the days came near for him to be taken up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem." So Jesus is on the journey, and he is meeting people, and exorcizing demons, and healing and teaching, but he is on his way. And he knows what's going to happen when he gets to Jerusalem.

These Pharisees say, Jesus, get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you. This is not the Herod we know from Jesus' birth stories. That was Herod the Great, who questioned the wise men, and killed all the children two years of age around Jerusalem because he was threatened by a new king being born.

This Herod is Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. Herod Antipas had control of Galilee and Perea; Galilee was to the north and Perea south and east. Herod Antipas was not an unusual politician in that once he was in power he didn't want to let go of the reigns of power, so he was threatened by anybody who had a following, and he didn't welcome criticism. He had divorced his first wife and married his brother's wife, and John the Baptist criticized him for it, so Herod had John jailed and eventually beheaded.

And now he was hearing about this teacher Jesus who was becoming popular and gathering large crowds. Earlier in Luke he had said he wanted to get to know him. Now he is threatened. So the Pharisees apparently hear of Herod's desire to kill Jesus, and they say, You've got to make yourself scarce. What doesn't Herod like about Jesus? He is probably threatened by somebody who says things like, The first will be last, and the last will be first (just before this passage in 13:30). That's not something powerful people like to hear. Herod had a right to be threatened by Jesus who wanted to see the poor lifted up and was critical of the powerful who abused their authority.

So how does Jesus respond? Is he threatened? Is he afraid? Does he decide to change his plans because somebody's out to get him? No, this is what he says, "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. Yet today, tomorrow and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'" Jesus is saying, I know who I am; I know where I'm going, I know what my mission is.

When we hear somebody called a fox, by the way, we tend to think they are being called wily or cunning. That's not the Hebrew definition. In the Hebrew culture, a fox was a varmint. This was not a positive term in any way. I'm sure the Pharisees didn't want to go back to Herod and tell him what Jesus called him! But notice Jesus' response. Notice he doesn't go to Herod to try to convince him he's not a threat. And he doesn't say to the Pharisees, Tell him I'm sorry. I'll back off.

He says, Give Herod a message for me. Herod needs to do what he does; he's a ruler. Rulers get threatened. Rulers threaten people. Rulers put people to death. That's his job. It doesn't matter to Jesus what Herod is about, what matters is what he is about. And Jesus says, I need to do what I'm called to do. Now when he says, today, tomorrow and the next day, I am casting out demons and healing people and finishing my work, he doesn't literally mean today, tomorrow and the next day, he is being poetic. But he's saying, I am heading for Jerusalem, and I need to finish the job God has given me. I am freeing people from their demons, I am healing people from their illnesses, and I am on my way to die and to be raised again. That is my job, and I will not be deterred.

There is a term for this kind of clarity, for this kind of focus in your life, and the term is self-differentiation. A Christian who is self-differentiated can say, This is what I believe, this is where God has led me, without being defensive about it, or without attacking other people for their beliefs. It doesn't mean all beliefs are equally good, it means I can hold my beliefs without attacking you for yours.

A self-differentiated Christian doesn't feel helpless when other people disagree, but can look at the options of how to respond. Jesus is the most self-differentiated human that ever lived. I'm not saying he was just human, I'm saying in his full humanity he was fully self-differentiated. Jesus simply says, This is what I'm about, this is what I need to do. I am on my way to Jerusalem. Herod needs to do what he does.

And then Jesus offers this lament in v.34: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those that are sent to it!” That was not a typical fate of the prophets, by the way. There is the story of one prophet killed during Jeremiah’s time, a man named Uriah, who criticized Jerusalem and her leaders just like Jeremiah did, and was killed for it. But Luke’s Jesus may be looking ahead to when others will be killed in Jerusalem as well, the early followers of Jesus, Stephen who was the first martyr, and James, Jesus’ brother, the head of the church in Jerusalem. And he knows what his fate will be when he goes to Jerusalem. They will reject him.

But listen to the way he treats those who reject him (v.35) “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!” More than one story is told of a mother bird that protects her young ones under her wings. Stories are told of hens that gather their young ones during a fire and place them under their wings, and the chicks survive.

Jesus says to the people of Jerusalem, That’s what I want for you! I want to gather you to myself, but you insist on running away. Jesus is saying, I am the mother who will pursue my children through thick and thin, through good school days and bad, through dumb decisions and missed curfews and disrespectful words.

As somebody said, Jesus is the mother who folds the covers down and fluffs the pillow and says, Don’t let me catch you ever doing that again! Jesus is judgment and mercy! Jesus wants the best for us, and wants to gather us together under his wings, and yet we run because we think we know better, we think that pathway looks more interesting, and we ignore the warnings that it will hurt us and others. Jesus says, O, how I wanted to gather you under my wings, and you were not willing.

And there is judgment coming, because Jesus says, See, your house is left to you. You are refusing this relationship, and you will need to make your own plans then. Sometimes we see the smoke and the flames in our lives, and we still refuse to come back to God. The promise is not that we will be spared all harm under those wings. The promise is that in that relationship, we don’t need to be afraid of the one who kills the body, but can’t harm the soul. In life or in death, we belong to God. And nothing can remove us from God’s care, from under God’s wings.

Jesus says, when the foxes of this world gather around, I will spread my wings over you and will sacrifice myself for you. As one commentator says, At the very least the mother hen hopes that she can satisfy the predator’s appetite, so that he will leave her babies alone. And isn’t that what happens on the cross? Jesus takes the blows for us. The power of the enemy’s talons and fangs was put up against the power of a mother hen’s love for her chicks.

And on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus has been gathering his chicks all along the way: the lawyer who asks, Who is my neighbor? Martha who gets righteously indignant that Mary gets all the attention and doesn’t help; disciples who are nervous about what faces them in

Jerusalem; a bent-over woman he heals on the Sabbath. He is gathering all these chicks along the way under his wings.

And as we journey through Lent he is gathering us as we are willing. He wants to cast out those things that oppress us, and bring healing to our brokenness, and teach us about life in his kingdom, and simply sit with us. He gathers us to himself, as a mother hen gathers her chicks.

And what about our journey? Do we know who we are? Do we know who we belong to in baptism? Do we know what our mission is? A woman once asked John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, what he would do if he knew he were going to die at midnight the next day. He replied, Well, madam, just as I intend to spend it now. I would preach this evening at Gloucester, and again at five tomorrow morning; after that I would ride to Tewkesbury, preach in the afternoon, and meet the societies in the evening (those were the small groups of his day). I would then go to Martin's house...talk and pray with the family as usual, retire myself to my room at 10 o'clock, commend myself to my heavenly Father, lie down to rest, and wake up in glory."

John Wesley knew what God had called him to do and he was going to do it until God called him home.

Olympian Brock Kreitzburg was a bobsledder during the Torino Olympics in 2006. His team came in seventh. But his team, USA-1 sled, was ranked No. 1 in the world in 2007. Then last season, he had two major hip surgeries. He lost his ability to walk, he lost the team stipend, Home Depot cut the Olympic employment program. For this seminary graduate, this was a wake-up call.

This is what he said: "It stripped everything away that was important to me: bobsledding, money, my spot on the national team. All I have is God. So I've learned to completely trust Him, and trust His plan. The most difficult prayer, but the most sincere prayer I pray, is, 'Let Your will be done,' because mine usually crashes and burns."

It usually takes six months for an athlete to start running after that kind of surgery. Brock Kreitzburg began to run after 10 and a half weeks. By last June, he was back on the national team. In November, he competed in the World Cup- and finished just 12/100s of a second behind USA-1. He didn't make the Olympic Team, but now he's focusing on a different kind of reward. Kreitzburg said, "I've come to a point where I'm grateful for all that's happened this past year. I've experienced a lot and none of it compares with my relationship with the Lord – the joy and happiness and peace that I've found in Him."

Jesus says, Go tell Herod, I know who I belong to, I know what my mission is: today, tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. I pray that through these forty days of Lent, Jesus would gather us again from where we have strayed, as we make our own journey to the cross and to new life. Amen.

