

## A Mother's Song

The heading at the beginning of Psalm 131 says that this is a “Song of Ascents.” As you might remember from a few weeks ago, that makes it a pilgrimage song—one of a collection of psalms people in biblical times sang on their way “up” to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. So I’d like you to imagine a scene like this.

A family is traveling from their home in Galilee, in the north of Israel, up to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. And among this extended family group is a young mother carrying her child—not quite a babe in arms, but a little older, what we might call a toddler. It’s a picture of contentment—his little arms locked around her neck as his head rests on her shoulder.

The city of Jerusalem is located on a hilltop, surrounded on all sides by a steep valley, and as this mother approaches Jerusalem from the east and crests the top of the Mount of Olives she has a bird’s-eye view of the holy city. And at the city’s highest point she can see the temple! It’s the largest structure she would probably ever see, gleaming in the light of a bright spring sun. And more than that—this is the house of God. Inside its gilded chambers, behind the curtain of the Holy of Holies, rests the Ark of the Covenant, where the Scriptures say the glory of the Lord abides, enthroned upon the cherubim. And in that moment of wonder, she prays:

<sup>1</sup>O LORD, my heart is not lifted up,  
my eyes are not raised too high;  
I do not occupy myself with things  
too great and too marvelous for me.

<sup>2</sup> But I have calmed and quieted my soul,  
like a weaned child with its mother;  
my soul is like the weaned child  
that is with me.

<sup>3</sup> O Israel, hope in the LORD  
from this time on and forevermore.

Psalm 131 is most likely the prayer of a mother. But it has not always been read this way. This though may not have entered many interpreters' minds because the heading at the beginning calls it this "Psalm of David"—but we've seen that it's not certain how literally we should take that. Or it may be because of a narrow vision that doesn't consider the possibility that a biblical writer could be a woman. But the most straightforward way to translate the Hebrew at the end of verse 2 is: "my soul is like the weaned child that is with me." And so I invite you to at least humor me this morning and consider this possibility.

By any measure Psalm 131 is a song of humble, contented trust in the Lord. Genuinely humble people are often soft-spoken people, and they are often people of few words. And so it may be especially appropriate that this psalm is so short – it's exactly what you might expect from someone modest enough to write these words.

At first glance, we might even decide that there's too much humility here. What does it mean to say, "I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me?" It sounds a bit too much like the kind of thing people on the

top of the heap tell people at the bottom in order to make sure they stay there. You know – when the powers-that-be warn the black folks not to get too “uppity,” or a teacher or counselor cautions a bright female student not to set her sights “too high.”

Things have changed somewhat now, but I remember my mother talking about her options in life – as she perceived them – when she graduated from high school late in the 1930's. She was an excellent student. She graduated one, if not two, years early, and when she went back for a post-graduate year to take some extra courses, she knocked off two years of French in just those two semesters.

I don't think that anyone ever sat her down and told her, but she learned as she was going through school that a bright girl like her had essentially two options for a profession – she could be a teacher or a nurse. She chose to be nurse, and was a first-rate one. At the same time, though, she was a very intelligent woman who went through her life never thinking of herself that way. She was taught not to set her sights “too high,” and she learned the lesson well.

So speaking about humility always has a dangerous side – the psychological danger of crushing a sensitive and vulnerable spirit, the political danger of being co-opted as a tool to keep people in their place. But I think if we read Psalm 131 carefully and thoughtfully, we will find here a picture of humility that is healthy and pleasing to God.

First, if we read these words in the context in which the Bible puts them—if this really a song sung in the shadow of the temple—we can recognize that this woman is humble in the presence of God. She's not comparing herself to other people here; she's considering the Lord God Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, the Redeemer of Israel, the Lord of hosts whose glory rests in the temple. This is, in other words, a very appropriate and healthy humility.

And secondly, we need to remember that the pages of the Bible are filled with stories of strong mothers. Consider the mother of Moses, who went to such great lengths to save her son from Pharaoh's genocide, or Hannah the mother of Samuel who stood up for herself when the high priest dismissed her, or the faith and courage of Mary the mother of our Lord, or the Canaanite mother in the gospel reading who was so bold in seeking help from Jesus for her daughter. These were all humble women, but they knew their value in the eyes of God and they were fierce in their devotion to their children.

The world is full of mothers like that. In the introduction of a new book I just picked up this week about poverty in America, Mauricio Miller describes his mother, Berta.

Berta only attended school through the third grade. In the Mexico of her era that was not rare. When two divorces left her ostracized by many in her small Catholic town of Nogales, Mexico, she was left with two young children, no money, and no marketable skills. Seeking a fresh start, she immigrated to the U.S. where her daughter became a teen mother at the age of sixteen. The mounting stress of this life taxed her health, leaving her with bleeding ulcers among other maladies.

He goes on to say that when people look at women like his mother they too often see someone who is caught in the trap of her own poor choices, or someone who is a victim of the system—but in any case someone who deserves judgment or who needs to be rescued. But he says this about Berta,

So what is the reality of Berta's story? Like the vast majority of the working poor she was smart, creative, and amazingly determined. She was self-taught in math and English and enlisted a friend to teach her bookkeeping so she could get a job. A great seamstress with a natural talent for design she envisioned and made dresses to make money on the side. Determined to make a better life for her children she saved enough to find the fastest growing city in California, and moved there. She put her kids into good schools, worked two jobs, and saved to get her son into and through U.C. Berkeley as an engineer. Yes, there was drama and trauma but, my God, this woman, my mother, was to be admired and trusted, not pitied.

(Mauricio L. Miller. *The Alternative: Most of What You Believe About Poverty Is Wrong*. Lulu Publishing Services. Kindle Edition.)

When we picture that mother on the path to Jerusalem, we should picture a mother like Hannah or Mary or the anonymous Canaanite woman, or Berta. They should be our image of humility.

But the psalm goes further—this humble woman says that this is also the way she pictures God. Like the young child she holds in her arms she sees herself being held by a God who is strong and protective and safe and nurturing – a God to whom we can fully entrust herself. And to whom we can fully entrust ourselves.

Writing about this psalm, the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann points out that this is pretty much the opposite of the modern mindset that values independence more than anything else. Parents devote tremendous

energy and resources to try to get their children to become independent adults. We invest equally large amounts of energy and resources in trying to assure that we remain independent for the rest of our lives. And we look with admiration on those people who are able to make it “on their own” – the self-made businessman or the single mother who puts herself through college.

But here we have a psalm that doesn't emphasize being big and strong and brave and independent, but celebrates climbing up into God's lap and being like a little child. Jesus said, “Unless you ... become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3)

Psalm 131 calls us to a quiet place where we climb up into God's lap – a place where being is more important than doing. It calls us to hope in the Lord, or – as another psalm puts it – to cease striving and know that the Lord is God. It is as we enter that place, which we can only enter by confessing our dependence on God, that we will draw the strength and hope to walk with him, and minister with him, and love with him.

God calls us to that quiet place, to be like little children in our mother's lap, to surrender our pride – whatever form it may take – and hope in him.

Amen.

*Rev. David Spaulding  
First Presbyterian Church, Dixon  
August 20, 2017*