

Psalm 131

H. Stephen Shoemaker

The Psalms may be the most neglected part of the Bible in our preaching today. This is lamentable because they are a rich resource for preaching and worship. As John Calvin said, they are “the anatomy of all parts of the soul,” and they help us bring all that we are before God.

The model I use for preaching the Psalms is Kierkegaard’s model for worship. Worship is not like the theater where the preacher is the actor, the congregation is the audience, and God is the prompter. To the contrary, God is the audience, the congregation are the actors, and the worship leader is the prompter helping the congregation say their right lines before God. The Psalms uniquely help us bring all that we are and have before God, our praise and thanksgiving, our trust and our doubt, our sadness, our guilt, our fear, our helplessness, and our anger.

When you preach a Psalm, the goal is to help (prompt) the congregation to experience what the Psalmist feels and to bring that into the presence of God. Therefore, we should not just use psalms of praise and thanksgiving, the “summery” psalms; we should also use laments and confessions and psalms of supplication and of vengeance. These “wintery” psalms help us bring, respectively, our sadness, guilt, desperation, and anger before God that they may be transfigured in the light of God’s mercy.

The goal of such preaching goes beyond explaining the particular feeling of a psalm or commanding it (you ought to be thankful!); you help them to experience that feeling and to bring it before God.

Below is a sermon on a psalm of trust, Psalm 131.

Theology as Lullaby

Text: Psalm 131

How do you preach a lullaby? That is what this psalm is a lullaby. It is a tender and intimate night song. It is the song of a troubled heart being given the peace that passes understanding. If we could pray it as our own, perhaps we would sleep better at night.

You may think it risky for a preacher to begin a sermon talking of lullabies and sleep, given as congregations are to use the sermon time to catch up on badly needed sleep.

Now I lay me down to sleep
The sermon’s long and the subject’s deep.

If he gets through before I wake
Somebody give me a gentle shake.

But nevertheless we proceed.

Psalms of trust are one category of Psalms; they are among our favorites: Psalm 27: "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?" Or Psalm 121 "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence does my help come?" Or the favorite of the favorites, Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd." We could arrange the psalms of trust into two groups: male and female. Some psalms of trust use masculine images of God; others use feminine images. Of course, God is beyond male and female. But because God is the Holy One in whose image we were made male and female (Gen. 1:27), both masculine and feminine images of God are appropriate.

The masculine psalms of trust I call "fortress" psalms. God is pictured as the fortress, the stronghold, the rock of salvation. God is pictured as a king who protects us with his might. Martin Luther's great hymn "A Mighty Fortress is our God," based on Psalm 46, is a stirring expression of a "fortress" psalm of trust.

The feminine psalms of trust are what I call "wings" psalms.

"Keep me as the apple of the eye
hide me in the shadow of thy wings." (17:8)

Salvation is pictured as being in the safety and nurture of the Wings of God. It is a peaceful place of well-being and deep communion. The image is of being gathered in the arms of God as a child nestled in a mother's arms, as a chick under the wings of a mother hen. It is not exclusively a feminine image; it can picture the tenderness of a father toward his child or husband toward his wife (see Ruth), but it is predominantly a feminine image (just as the strong ruler is a dominantly but not exclusively masculine image).

We should welcome such a healthy duality of images. The Bible refuses to force God into one image, one metaphor; it refuses to paint one portrait. And with good reason. A single image, metaphor, picture of God would break the second of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt not make for thyself a graven image."

Good biblical theology makes proper use of all biblical images of God, refusing to single any out lest it turn one into a graven image -- whether of stone or gold or mind.

So today we hear a psalm of trust in the feminine mode. God is like a mother in whose arms we are calmed, happy and secure. It is theology as lullaby.

"I have calmed and quieted my soul
like a child quieted at its mother's breast
like a child that is quieted is my soul."

Perhaps a lullaby is the most poignant expression of trust. Can you imagine a serenity deeper than that in a room at night where a mother rocks her child to sleep singing a lullaby?

The Psalmist was a developmental psychologist before his time. Eric Erickson's insight has become gospel for his profession. He said that the great developmental task of the first eighteen months of life is trust vs. mistrust. The mother-child bond those first eighteen months establishes to a remarkable degree whether we move through the world with a basic sense of trust or mistrust, whether we are at ease in our world or suffer the constant disease of mistrust.

How does this affect our religious faith?

Those first eighteen months do not determine whether we can trust God or not, but our parent's nurture of us has the capacity, to use John the Baptist's phrase, to "prepare the way of the Lord." Our nurture can make his way smooth and plain or it can make it a rough and difficult path.

My own parents made the way smooth and plain for me. I do not remember the first eighteen months, but I do remember many nights when they would put me to bed by reading a story or singing a song or just talking, all the while rubbing my back; so when I read the famous verse from Deuteronomy, "the eternal God is your dwelling place and underneath are the everlasting arms," it resonated deeply with my human experience, of nights drifting to sleep with a hand on my back.

So it is not difficult for my soul to sing:

"Calmed and quieted is my soul
like a child quieted at its mother's breast;
like a child that is quieted is my soul."

But this lullaby is not for children only, and it is not only for those who have been given a basic sense of trust by the grace of good parenting those first eighteen months of life.

It is a song of mature faith. It pictures the simplicity on the yonder side of complexity not on this side of complexity. Simplicity this side of complexity is only simplistic; it is not childlike, it is childish. The simplicity which has traveled through complexity to the yonder side, however, is the spiritual simplicity of mature faith.

The Old Testament pioneer in the study of the Psalms, Professor Gunkel, put the psalms of trust as a subcategory of individual laments. And with spiritual perception he did that. Those who sang these songs of trust had first sung songs of sadness. The writer of the 23rd Psalm had walked through the valley of the shadow of death. The one who sang the 46th Psalm had felt his world shake and the walls of his city totter before experiencing God as his strong fortress. These psalms of trust are sung by people whose faces are deeply lined with life's troubles and whose voices have a slight tremor of pain.

Psalm 131 is a tender and intimate song. It is simple but not simplistic. It displays childlike trust, but it is not childish. It is not sung this side of trouble; it

has walked through it.

It is a song of mature faith. It may even be called a song for midlife crisis. This psalm of trust has confronted the crises of the adult life.

Youth lives by the illusion of a limitless future. It is driven by ambition, by the quest for perfect knowledge, by the quest to change the world.

But life confronts us with brute facts of reality: the brute facts of our own personal limitations, of society's stubborn resistance to transformation, and of life's dark tragedy. A mature faith seeks to trust God and have hope in the midst of these crises as we discover personal self-limitation, the intransigence of society, and the tragic dimensions of life. All of these are tests of mature faith.

As youth, we dream of being Presidents, of marrying a millionaire, of being the top of your profession, of discovering a cure for heart disease, of winning the American League batting championship.

But here come the brute facts of reality. You lose an election for president of the student government -- and you were running unopposed. The man you marry snores and cannot even qualify for an American Express Gold Card. You labor in relative obscurity. You can't even cure your own heartburn. And as for the batting championship, you cannot even make the church softball team. You are confronted with your limitations.

And you run into life's limitations as well.

You hope to change the world, and it seems to get worse. And perhaps most difficult of all, despite your attempts to lead a good life, you find yourself bewildered and brokenhearted by life's shipwrecks and heartbreaks.

Our Psalmist no doubt had faced these tests of faith. Now hear this song:

"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."

My heart is not haughty, he confesses. I am no longer driven by ambitious desires. He has survived the disillusion of his own limitations and the world's limitations.

A mature faith can. It rests in the security that worth in God's eyes lies not in how much you can achieve, but who you are -- a beloved child of God.

"Keep me the apple of your eye
hide me in the shadow of your wings."

Theology as lullaby is not the path of cynicism, giving up on the world or saying, "what's the use?" Neither is it an escapist regression to childhood. It is the discovery of a deep and unshakable place of trust found in the arms of God, who regards you as the apple of his eye.

With that kind of trust and peace and security in the arms of God, you can

live life to its fullest, not blinded by vain ambition, not fooled by your own mask of perfection, but realistic and hopeful and free to be and to do what you must do.

But there is yet another crisis lurking in the backdrop of this psalm. It is the darkness of life's senseless tragedy. We can go mad trying to make sense of it, trying to understand these mysteries. The Psalmist has tried to storm heaven's door and discover the answers to these questions: Why do the wicked prosper? Why do the innocent suffer, why do the good die young? But the Psalmist (much like Job, 42:3) has come through that to say:

"I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me."

It is the admission of the end of human wisdom. It says my knowledge alone cannot take me to You. It recognizes what a mature faith must -- that trust is deeper than knowledge, deeper than theology. Our life is as Anselm said centuries ago: "faith seeking understanding." Understanding will not lead us to faith. Faith comes first, and from that foundation stone of trust we seek understanding.

We can spend the rest of our lives twisting and turning on life's mysteries. Our minds can be continually fretful. The alternative is not the dismissal of understanding. It is trust as the basis of life, the foundation of understanding. Trust is even deeper than what we believe about God. It is a peace that passes understanding.

"O Lord,
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me."

We find that trust at a level of being deeper than our minds can take us. I read recently a passage, Deuteronomy 29:29. I offer it to you who walk in shadows:

"The secret things belong to the Lord
our God, but the things that are revealed
belong to us and to our children forever"

There are those secret things that belong to the Lord, the dark secret mysteries of life and death which we cannot fathom: why death, why disease, why sadness, and evil and pain? These secrets are hid. Now we see through a glass darkly.

But that is not the whole verse: "but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children." There are the revealed things -- these are ours. God has given them to us. The Exodus, God's liberation of his children from Pharaoh; the Ten Commandments, God's truth that keeps us free -- these belong to us. With them we go on in faith. And God keeps on giving us revealed things: prophet's

vision, psalmist's song, sage's wise homey advice.

But the supreme revealed thing is Jesus the Christ -- God's own Son, who came to show us a love so broad, deep, and high that nothing can separate us from it. Because Jesus Christ has shown us the true face of God, we can trust God. Jesus Christ, the Resurrection and the Life, gives us promise of eternal life beyond death, where we will see face to face and understand as we are now understood by God. Those revealed things belong to us and to our children forever. They help us rest at God's breast.

It was this Jesus who, hanging on a Roman gallows, said the bedtime prayer of every Hebrew child: "Into Thy Hands, I commend my Spirit." Now I lay me down to sleep.

The lullaby is not for children only, is it? It is for us all.

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.

But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a child quieted at its mother's breast;
like a child that is quieted is my soul.

O, People of God,
hope in the Lord from
this time forth and for evermore.



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