

Quiet Ambition

Psalm 131

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Sunday, August 23, 2009

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

I remember, as do many of you, those hot summer vacation road trips in the family station wagon – piled high with kids and suitcases. We drove our parents crazy because we passed the time by fighting with each other over really important things like who got ‘dibs’ on the stuff on the side of the road or who had crossed over the line on our seat in the car. We also sang repetitive, annoying songs like “99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall,” or “John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt,” or “My Name is Yon Yonson.” These were the songs that would never end and the only purpose they had was to pass the time. But, what if we had sung songs that taught us something? What if we had sung songs that helped us to understand our relationship with the Lord? What would that have been like? Let us pray.

Lord God, we thank you for the privilege of being able to look into your Word. By the power of your Holy Spirit, enable us to hear what you have to say to us and strengthen us to live according to your Word. Amen.

What would it be like to sing songs that help shape our faith? Music combined with words is a powerful force. Think about the hymns you love, the deep songs of your own life of faith. When we hear them, sing them, they touch us intellectually, spiritually and emotionally. Songs and hymns of the faith are powerful theology delivery systems and that’s why the content of a hymn is as important as its music.

Psalm 131 is one of the Psalms of Ascent. The fifteen Psalms of Ascent (Psalm 120- through Psalm 134) were put together as a small songbook before all the Psalms were collected and ordered as what is essentially the Prayer Book or Song Book of the Bible. They were meant to be sung by the people of God while on a spiritual journey. Some scholars believe that they were sung as the tribes went up to Jerusalem for festivals and others believe that they were sung as worshippers ascended the fifteen steps from one court to another in the Temple. They could have been sung on both occasions, but the point is that were sung as the people sought to come into the presence of the Lord. The songs prepared them. The songs shaped them. So, let’s look at Psalm 131.

The psalmist first addresses God before he speaks to the people. And this is what he says to the Lord: I have not lifted up my heart; I have not raised my eyes too high; and, I have not occupied myself with things too great for me. This is a strong declaration of humility, but it is not the kind of modesty that has a proper respect for the limits of human thought or abilities.¹ That would be no different than the kind of humility promoted by ancient philosophers. This is the kind of humility that basically says, “Lord, you are God and I am not.”

To lift up one’s heart (when it’s not being lifted up to the Lord) would be to elevate your own experience over that of another or even to say that you are the judge of your own experience. Since the heart was considered the core of your human nature, then to lift up one’s heart was to say that what you do or say or think trumps anything or anyone else.

Lifting up one’s eyes is a Hebrew idiom that we would better understand by saying, “He really looks down his nose at people.” It also speaks of the kind of pride that looks at the world as if one owned it. ²

So, the psalmist is saying, so far, that he doesn’t think that he is any better or more important than anyone else. But he has made a third assertion – that he has not occupied himself with things that are too great for him. He is saying here that he has humility not just with respect to other people, but also with respect to God. You see, in scripture, “great things” are ascribed to God and when adversaries of God are condemned (particularly in the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation), it is because they themselves claimed to do great things. They have arrogantly gone beyond what humans should do and have claimed

things that are the province of God alone.

But does this mean that we are to be, as Eugene Peterson says, “doormat Christians and dishrag saints?”³ By no means. Rather, we are being challenged to be content with what God has given us in each moment and to think about what God is calling us to do instead of following our own inadequately informed impulses. Pride leads to reckless behavior and it can throw the world around us into great confusion.

We traditionally think of the Psalms as being written by David. In fact, in an earlier time, the entirety of the Psalms was referred to as “The David.” Regardless of who the original author was, I think we are helped in our interpretation of this Psalm if we think of David as the author. He would have learned the destructive lessons of pride the hard way. It was his pride that made his desire for Bathsheba the motivation for his behavior. It was his sense that he owned all he surveyed that justified his behavior. And, it threw the world around him into sin filled chaos as he tried to cover up what he had done.

John Calvin, whose quincentennial we are observing this year, says this in his commentary on this Psalm: “...those who yield themselves up to the influence of [prideful] ambition will soon lose themselves in a labyrinth of perplexity.” Just as David ended up with awful unintended consequences that caused his life to spiral out of control, so we, too, can end up lost and confused if we choose our way over God’s way.

The Psalmist says that there is a more excellent way – it is the way that says I will not take another step unless God calls me to it. And it is in following God’s call, that we discover who we truly are. We discover that we are not called to great things, but to significant things.

But this is not easy. We live in a world that encourages self-promotion and a get-to-the top kind of ambition. And some of the things that encourage ambition are noble – the ambition to achieve justice or to do acts of mercy. The seduction happens when the work centers around us and elevates us in the eyes of the world. Those things should be aspirations of the Christian, but the work is done because God has called us to it, not because we can make a name for ourselves in doing it.

In the swirl of life what are we to do? Well, the writer tells us what he did. He calmed and quieted his soul. That is an act of the will and I can say with some certainty that it is easier said than done.

When I was growing up in South Florida, I did some SCUBA diving, back before the days when you had to be licensed. I would just take my tank and swim fins and swim mask to the beach and noodle around under water. I didn’t go too far or too deep. I was really a Chicken Little of the Sea. And, my time underwater was complicated by the fact that I did not have a prescription-ground mask. I was blind as a bat under water. But that didn’t matter, because when you scuba dive at the beach, there’s not a lot to see...except for this one day. I noticed something sticking up out of the ocean floor. It was smooth and brown and I thought – a nice piece of driftwood. I had never found a piece of driftwood just the right size, so I reached down for it, to pull it out of the sand. And it moved.

Well, it was a nurse shark – a small five-footer – but it scared me, so I started swimming into shore as fast as I could. All the time, my mind kept saying, “Don’t panic...first rule is don’t panic.” But my body ignored my mind. Finally, after about thirty feet, I stopped, trying to get my breathing under control. I turned to look and saw the shark heading as far away from me as fast as she could go. Here’s the summary: I saw something I wanted. I didn’t see it clearly, but grabbed for it anyway. It turned out to be something unexpected and turmoil followed. I had to calm myself.

But on what basis can we calm and quiet ourselves? Certainly not out of a self-willed stoicism...an act of mind over matter. No, the psalmist is not encouraging a self-centered self-discipline. The ability to become calm, quiet and contented comes from God...of resting in the arms of the Lord as a weaned child rests in the arms of her mother.

Now, why a weaned child? Wouldn’t it make more sense to say, “Like a nursing child in the arms of her mother”? I mean, a nursing child is totally dependent on the mother. Wouldn’t that be a stronger image? Well, let’s think about it.

Again, Eugene Peterson, in commenting on this psalm says that there are two equal and equally bad temptations. The first is that of pride...to be totally dependent on yourself...to think that, as Cleo LaRue said a couple of Sundays ago, quoting The Invictus: "I am the captain of my fate, I am the master of my soul." The other extreme is an infantile dependency – to be insecure and helpless, exhibiting a false humility which becomes just as self-centered as pride.

Not a nursing child – nursing children are not yet what they are meant to be. It's a necessary stage, but it is a temporary stage. A weaned child now has a certain freedom and a bigger world in which to she can explore and discover and enjoy. One mother described the transition in her daughter's life: The summer that she was weaned, her world opened up. She was mobile the entire day running to each new and fascinating thing, and then running back to tell me what she had discovered. She was interested in playing cars with her brother and imagining grand oceanic journeys from the bunk beds. She was interested in dressing up her dolls and stuffed animals and laying them down for naps. When they woke, she'd make them a snack in her kitchen...there were times when she wanted to nurse again, but I told her no...that time was over. 'Okay, mom,' she said. I picked her up. Her little arms encircled my neck and held on so tight in her 'big squeeze' hug. She rested her head on my shoulder, relaxing. When I thought she was satisfied, I put her down. But she wasn't finished yet. "Mama, can you pick me up and make me warm with your arms again?" 4

This is a child who has ordered her life around her mother. She knows that even though she no longer is nursing, her mother still provides all her food. She comes to her mother with all her joys and stresses and needs and longs for her mother to make her warm with her arms.

In many ways, this psalm is like a lullaby and a lullaby is not child's play...it is not kid's stuff. It is the ultimate expression of trust. If this Psalm had started only with the image of a quiet child, it would be naïve. But, remember, it began with the recognition that we are tempted to go out into life with ambitions that can be our undoing...that in fact, we have done so and suffered the consequences. So this lullaby is sung to us after we have been disillusioned by our own limits and the limitations of the world. 5

We have heard this song before. We have heard Jesus say from the cross, "Into your hands I commit my spirit." That was the bedtime prayer of Hebrew children. May it be our prayer, as well, but not just a bedtime prayer. It should be our waking up prayer...our going to work prayer...our living our lives prayer. People of God, hope in the Lord, from this time forth and forevermore. Amen.

1. Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, p. 262 2. Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 73-150*, p. 251 3. Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, p. 150 4. Heather Ruch, *My Arms Will Always Be Yours*, <http://www.lli.org/NB/NBSepOct07p206.html> 5. H. Stephen Shoemaker, *Psalm 131*, *Review and Expositor*, 85, p. 92