

June 9, 2024

Sermon by Rev. Amy Delaney

Today I chose a psalm that has long been a favorite of mine, a psalm that speaks of rest. Listen as I read Psalm 131 from the New Revised Standard translation:

### **Psalm 131 - Song of Quiet Trust**

A Song of Ascents. Of David.

<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.

Today we are meeting outside.

In the moments of silence in worship this morning you may have heard bird song, felt the breeze, seen the sun shining, smelled the roses in the rose garden.

I particularly like the sound the wind makes in the Douglas firs during a light breeze. It reminds me of the backyard of our previous home, where we had nine Douglas firs in a grove of about 40 trees. When I hear the sound of the wind in the trees and close my eyes, I find myself remembering that place and relaxing in my neck, my shoulders, and even my mind. I captured a short video of the wind in the trees before we moved, just to carry a piece of that place with me.

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The people of Japan have a concept called *shinrin yoku*<sup>1</sup>, or forest bathing. It stems from the recognition that each of us needs time in nature to receive the peace and quiet that nature provides. When we turn off our phones, move more slowly, breathe deeply, pay attention particularly to the sounds we hear... gradually forest bathing does its work on us and we calm down inside, we become more grounded. The sound of water, the pleasing greens of the trees, the smooth and solid feel of rock... these all assist in resetting our inmost being, our soul, and allowing us to relax, to fully be present to ourselves and the forest.

Where is the place where you rest and reset? Where is the place where you are quieted inside and fully grounded? A grove of trees? The forest? The ocean? The mountains? Inside a quiet library? Where is your soul / your in-most being at rest?

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Psalms 120-134, the psalms that were sung by the Hebrew pilgrims as they made their way up the hill to the temple in Jerusalem for the festivals of the Jewish year. We have longer and shorter psalms in this section of the psalter. It's clear that for some psalms only the chorus remains, and that appears to be the case with 131. But what a chorus!

It begins with the attitude of the heart and the gaze of the eye.

<sup>1</sup> O LORD, my heart is not lifted up;  
my eyes are not raised too high;

Heart has a broader meaning in Hebrew than in English. It can mean will or intention, as well as emotions. It is the center of identity. One translator translates the phrase 'my heart' as 'me' or 'I' to reflect this concept into English.

If our hearts are lifted up, or our eyes raised high – that shows ambition – lofty ideas. But if we raise them so high "too high" we may become proud not in an honest assessment of a job well done, but because we see ourselves out of proportion. Instead of looking into a mirror and seeing ourselves, flaws and all, it is as if the mirror only shows us what we desire to see. If our hearts and eyes are raised too high - we feel exceptional, and not in a way that is healthy or compassionate toward others. A person like that runs over people with their ego, is unable to receive honest criticism or acknowledge when they have made mistakes.

The Psalmist rightly chooses to see themselves clearly and honestly – no better or worse than they truly are.

The Common English Bible (CEB) translates verse 1 this way:

LORD, my heart isn't proud;  
my eyes aren't conceited.

Returning to the NRSV, the second half of verse 1 continues this thought:

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

There are two ways to read this second half of the verse. The least helpful, in my opinion, is as a kind of false humility. This is the role that women were often subjected to in the past. Some of us here probably remember asking an honest question and hearing in response, "Don't worry your pretty little head about it." Thankfully that phrase has gone out of use, and I am grateful those times are mostly past. Some commentators have proposed that if the author is a woman this would have been a culturally appropriate response.

June 9, 2024

Sermon by Rev. Amy Delaney

The second way, more helpful way to read this is as a bridge between verse 1 and verse 2: It expresses true humility – my focus is not on pride and conceit. And it hints that there is something else that occupies the psalmist’s thoughts and keeps them grounded – which leads us to verse 2.

In verse 2, we find that the psalmist is grounded in the relationship they have with God, in their identity as a child of God. And so they encourage us to also be grounded in God’s love for us.

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Verse 2 reads

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.

Looking around this morning, I’d say there’s a good chance that a good number of us here have had the experience of being the primary caregiver for an infant. And so we know that caring for an infant isn’t all sweetness and light. Infants express their needs with cries- even loud cries that wake the neighbors. Caring for an infant is a 24/7 job with a demanding boss.

Psalm 131 took on new meaning for me once I became a parent. Yes, parenting infants is exhausting work, but it is also a source of great joy and delight, if only in 15 minute segments. There’s nothing better than an infant or young child falling asleep in your arms. I remember watching my children sleep and being fascinated by the little beads of sweat that would appear on their noses as they napped on a warm day. Those moments were infused with peace and love.

For a nursing mother, there is a difference, a shift in relationship when a child is weaned. Instead of seeking nourishment in your arms, the child seeks comfort and connection.

This is a model of our loving relationship with God. Eugene Peterson in his book on the Psalms of Ascent, A Long Obedience in the Same Direction, describes this shift as one from infantile dependency to childlike trust.<sup>ii</sup> Our faith journeys often make the same shift, from predominantly prayers where we demand something from God, toward prayers where we humbly rest in God’s presence with us in both the good and the hard times.

Listen again to verse 2:

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.

We should probably notice that the word translated ‘soul’ is nephesh, a Hebrew word that is also translated “in-most being.” Your soul is what makes you unique, it is what connect you to others and

June 9, 2024

Sermon by Rev. Amy Delaney

to God. It is the true-est part of you. It is the soul, I believe, that is calmed in forest bathing, in rocking a sleeping child in your arms, or sitting on a driftwood log and watching the waves of the ocean.

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I have had several spiritual directors over the years. One of those director's favorite questions for me was: How is your soul? What she meant, I believe, is: How are you deep inside? How are you doing with yourself? How are you doing with God? How is your soul? In the words of Psalm 131, is your soul quieted within you, like a child content in your arms?

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Several friends of mine are walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain this year. Thanks to Facebook I can check in on their pilgrimages and begin to hear stories.

One friend has just made it to the Cruz de Ferro, the Iron Cross. It is the highest point on the path. Many pilgrims bring a stone from home to leave at the cross, often labeling the stone with a word or a name. Some leave stones in honor or in memory of loved ones. Others leave stones as an act of letting go of anything that might hold them back once they return from the pilgrimage. As one friend said after leaving Cruz de Ferro, 'my prayer is that we will not pick up the burdens we have left behind.'

Laying down a burden, turning that burden over to Jesus and the work he has done for us through his death on the cross - that's one way to bring our souls back to rest, to return us to the place of child-like peace, grounded in the love of God for us.

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The final verse of this very short psalm is about Israel. In interpreting this verse, I want to remind us that when we read 'Israel' in the psalms, a useful interpretation for us today is "the people of God." In other words, Israel, here, means us, especially as we live and work in community.

<sup>3</sup>O Israel [ O People of God] , hope in the LORD  
from this time on and forevermore.

O people of God – our story is not yet complete. Hope in the Lord, hope in the slow and patient work of God in all the people of God – gathered here – and gathered around the world.

May our ambitions not lead to prideful conceit.

May we be centered in and comforted by God's love for us.

May we always find grounding in the beauty and richness of God's creation.

And may our souls find rest in God. Amen

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<sup>i</sup> For more information on Shinrin yoko see <https://www.forestryengland.uk/blog/forest-bathing>

<sup>ii</sup> Eugene Peterson, A Long Obedience in the Same Direction, second edition 2000, Intervarsity Press.