

Session Five: Tuesday, October 31: 10:30 until 11:45



^{TNK} **Psalm 131:1** A song of ascents. Of David. O LORD, my heart is not proud nor my look haughty; I do not aspire to great things or to what is beyond me;

² but I have taught myself to be contented like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child am I in my mind.

³ O Israel, wait for the LORD no **tools:** and forever.

Plan: Re-using some of our **tools:** *The strategy* of this second-shortest Psalm is to ask for one thing by negating others; we can decide if it is a simplex “ask” or not. The *type* of Psalm is an ascent or pilgrimage Psalm, where we get the impression a group is journeying toward Jerusalem, as adult males were to do three times a year (at a certain period of times; otherwise festivals were celebrated at home). We can talk about sociology: celebrate locally or centrally: pluses and minuses of each. A central *image* in the Psalm is the contented child: “My vital self is just like that,” claims and thanks the speaker. If this were a poem from another tradition, we might talk about mindfulness or serenity, the capacity not to yearn for more than what is. But the psalms will not fare very well in any mindfulness competition, were such an anomalous event to be held! Yearning fills the Psalms! After that pithy description, the psalmist prays for her people, that Israel might wait patiently and non-greedily for her God. Our last two moves, as usual: your own *questions* and insights about the *Sunday lectionary arrangement*.

^{TNK} **Psalm 63:1** A psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judah.

² God, You are my God; I search for You, my soul thirsts for You, my body yearns for You, as a parched and thirsty land that has no water.

³ I shall behold You in the sanctuary, and see Your might and glory,

⁴ Truly Your faithfulness is better than life; my lips declare Your praise.

⁵ I bless You all my life; I lift up my hands, invoking Your name.

⁶ I am sated as with a rich feast, I sing praises with joyful lips

⁷ when I call You to mind upon my bed, when I think of You in the watches of the night;

⁸ for You are my help, and in the shadow of Your wings I shout for joy.

⁹ My soul is attached to You; Your right hand supports me.

¹⁰ May those who seek to destroy my life enter the depths of the earth.



¹¹ May they be gutted by the sword; may they be prey to jackals.

¹² But the king shall rejoice in God; all who swear by Him shall exult, when the mouth of liars is stopped.

Plan: **Tools:** We have talked about imagery and images, and here we have a **symbol**, which is a sort of amalgam or massing of images to offer something deeper and more organic, more sensate (whereas images can be abstract; symbols, never). The symbol is the desire of the human (maybe of all creatures?) for God and the consequent quest to be with God. Is this our quest, that of most people we know? Look for the various ways in which the psalmist ramifies the symbol of searching/finding (or not finding). Another feature visible here (and in most Psalms) is the matter of **our opponents**: those who oppose us and whom we oppose. They are in most Psalms, and we will have talked about them before—about the difference between enemies and opponents (from theorists of nonviolence). A spirituality question: How does God manage ourselves and our opponents, do we suppose? This leads to another **spirituality question**: What does God desire? How do we distinguish what we want from what we want God to want? We earlier named the phenomenon of **re-valuing a former negative to become a positive**: How does that work, in our experience? We may factor in here some **help from history/ sociology/ anthropology**, where we can think about the original Psalmists and the world in which they lived with “enemies,” quite different from our own in at least some ways. And, of course, Our last two moves, as usual: your own **questions** and insights about the **Sunday lectionary arrangement**.

^{TNK} **Psalm 128:1** A song of ascents. Happy are all who fear the LORD, who follow His ways.

² You shall enjoy the fruit of your labors; you shall be happy and you shall prosper.

³ Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine within your house; your sons, like olive saplings around your table.

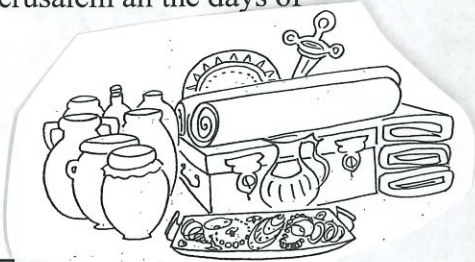
⁴ So shall the man who fears the LORD be blessed.

⁵ May the LORD bless you from Zion; may you share the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life,

⁶ and live to see your children's children. May all be well with Israel!

Plan:

Maybe out of laziness let me offer my comments, highlighting what **tools** turned them up:



As with others in this current string, this poem, called in its **superscription** a song of ascents, can also be **classified** as a beatitude, opening with a macarism: Happy or blessed are those who. . . fear YHWH and walk in his ways (v. 1). Though it can sound like a formula—do x and you will get y—its invitation and promise is far more subtle than that, as commentators on Matthew’s and Luke’s **intertextual** beatitudes of Jesus (in chapter 5 and 6 respectively) have established. To fear God, as is well-known, is not to be slavishly and coweringly terrorized but to respect and revere God, to love God, we might say. “Happy” means blessed and well-equipped, and it is both a cause and an effect of the main thing urged as this psalm (with many similar biblical passages) opens: To walk on the path that is God’s, that God directs us toward, that is God. The journey is a classic **literary symbol** for the constant choosing to live with a goal in mind or view, where the means and ends blend. So the very formula itself is already profound. Gandhi had an expression that sounds arcane but was actually simple: means and ends are interconvertible. The going there is the getting there; how one goes structures that one arrives. The insight is consoling, since often the means are clearer and seem closer than the end, so that to learn they are the same is wonderful. But again, it is a far cry from a flimsy offer of success. For a pilgrimage song, a song of ascents, a song to be sung (scholars suggest) while climbing up toward Zion, it again suggests that how we go, our journey along the path and our arrival at deeper consciousness and compassion shape—constitute—the nature of our arrival.

The psalm moves next (vv. 2-4) to detail how this might play out. Such a one who understands about revering and walking-with God may anticipate happiness and prosperity—literally, that he will eat what he produces. Again, this promise or blessing is deeper than it sounds, as it is used elsewhere to signify that a family can look forward to being consumers of their own labor rather than seeing it requisitioned, plundered, or taxed away (as **history and sociology** tell us what too often the case). The hope is thus for non-oppression, which was seen as the best way for walking with God. “Prosper” implies that good will be to you or yours, again presumably reciprocal. Other word pictures are offered: In a home, among those safely enclosed and eating from the inherited land will be a wife who, with her husband, will have produced thriving children gathered around the table. Anyone praying these psalms knows there is no guarantee of such a thing. Bad things happen constantly and inexplicably, but this is the hope,



the aim, the collaborative project of God and God's people. Asking is part of receiving. The psalm concludes (vv. 5-6) with a blessing, similar in tone to the macarism with which it started: May God bless you from the deeply cosmic richness of Zion, held as navel of the earth to those whose God may be accessed there. A blessing is not an entitlement though it is a strong performative, like an oath. It counts. May you share the fertility and prosperity native to Zion. May you see your children's children—Israel's early form of immortality as well as a prayer for longevity. May you hear your grandchildren know you and, presumably, tell their children of you! May all be well with Israel, implying that all is to be at equilibrium and as it should be, at well-being and reconciliation, we might say. It is a wonderful psalm to say on the path up to the temple, or along the path to any special place, along the path of Earth that is holy, sacred. There is no guarantee that such a lot will fall to any, and if they could vote, the biblical peoples would likely signify that more missed such well-being than enjoyed it. But they ask God for it, strive for it, enjoy it when it is present and long for it when absent. And, of course, Our last two moves, as usual: your own **questions** and insights about the **Sunday lectionary arrangement**.

Coda: Suggestion: Maybe we can conclude with a zoom presentation that ties together three things: David as the master-Psalmist; the theme of Christ the King, which clearly draws on King David; and a suggestion for another set of classes (at some point), on the Bible's most profound and gripping writing: the stories of Saul and David (and many others) in the books of 1-2 Samuel. They almost never feature in liturgy and are therefore little known (except for David and Bathsheba, who are much talked-about but perhaps not very well understood) and are my favorite material in the Bible.

