

God the Mother, God the Family  
Psalm 131 by Scott Brooks-Cope  
April 9, 2021 Mother's Day

Each week in the devotional book I use, I read the same Psalm every morning for a week. It gives a lot of time to hear God's voice in that Psalm...what is God saying to me today, this week in this particular Psalm. Then there is usually a New Testament scripture as well. All the texts lead up to the lectionary texts for the coming Sunday and these are the texts we use here along with churches around the world. Well a couple weeks ago, the Psalm for the week was our Psalm we read today. Psalm 131. It is interesting that it comes after one of the most agonizing Psalms of grief and despair. Psalm 130 starts "Out of the Depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord hear my voice!" The writer of the Psalm is struggling to believe that God hears his cry, hears when she calls out. But in their profound grief and sadness it is hard to believe. But the Psalm before 131 ends with hope in waiting for God's presence and love to again be new every morning.

So Psalm 131 is quite a contrast. It starts with a statement of humility. "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." Suzanne often says a benediction here that starts with the words, "Live Simply." To live simply is to not be arrogant about the things we can accomplish or do as human beings. It is living within our means financially, but also spiritually. It is letting things that are up to God, in God's hands. It is not forgetting that we are each limited, ---we have only so much power, so much strength, and so much ability to make a difference. As I prayed this Psalm and wrote about it, I reflected how God doesn't call me to take on all the problems of the world, or all the problems of the residents at Phoebe, or even all the problems with those I love. Each person is given the strength and ability to face and solve their own problems most of the time. Every once in a while, I may have wisdom, strength or love to give when someone else needs it...but even this kind of help I try to give in a humble kind of way, not pretending I know what's best for the other person. "My heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high." What a relief, I don't

have to be God. God's got it. God's in control. As the old hymn says, God's got the whole world in his hands." My struggle is usually to let go of things. To live simply.

The next lines are really beautiful:

"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."

What a beautiful image this is. God as the mother and we are the weaned child. We are the child that the mother has given everything to....her soul, her love, her nurture and nourishment. And now we are weaned but can still stay close to the mother for love and care. We can quiet our own souls because of the presence of God the mother.

That may not be a term we use very much in our faith tradition. We often talk about God the father, God the son, and God the Holy Spirit. But the truth is these are all metaphors for God that help us understand the character and person (or persons) of God. God is not literally a father, a son or a Spirit.....just as God is not a rock in a weary land as it says in another part of the scripture....or a shepherd....or a carpenter, though Jesus probably was a carpenter. Genesis 1: 27-28 makes it very clear that we can imagine God as both male and female. The text says: So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth....." Well there wouldn't have been much being fruitful and multiplying if there were only males created or only females created, right? Don't want to get too technical on that, as there are children here. But we also wouldn't have Mother's day or Father's day if there wasn't any multiplying going on. So both are equal and both are important for creation to go on. But what we may not often think about is this. If both male and female are made in God's image, then God can be imagined as a male or a female. And there are verses throughout scripture that refer to God as a mother.

In Psalm 91, God is the mother eagle teaching her eaglets to fly. And when they can't she swoops down underneath them, and carries them home to the nest on her wings. Jesus referred to himself as a mother hen who wished to gather all his chicks to himself, but the people would not let him. There is a church in Jerusalem that has a beautiful depiction in tile of Jesus as the mother hen gathering her chicks. In the book of Proverbs God is seen as wisdom or in Greek Sophia...a woman who goes through the streets crying for justice for the poor. These are beautiful images and metaphors that are often overlooked. They are overlooked by and large because we don't allow ourselves to think of how very big and diverse God is.....we don't allow ourselves to think of the fact that if everyone in the world is made in God's image, then God is pretty awesome and diverse.

But I love the image in this Psalm of the mother who has nursed her baby, and now has weaned this child. But because of the love of the mother, the child knows how to quiet and calm himself with the mother's presence. One reason I love this image is that I worked in a children's hospital for many years. Unfortunately, I was there very often in very sad circumstances when a mother and father had to come to grips with a very sick child. Often it was the mother who would be rocking the child, fiercely protecting her child when I would have the opportunity to be there to offer with them in that agony. I often imagined that as the mother was rocking the child, and holding the child, I had my arms around the mother and child and God the mother had her arms around all of us, rocking us and comforting us. Because I sure didn't know what to say. but I only hoped that they would feel God's hugs through my hugs, God's love through my love.

God the mother is a beautiful image. I often think of my Grammy Cope who rocked me as a child, read the Bible to me, taught me how to laugh and how to love.

When I was down in Virginia with my 15 month-old granddaughter a couple weeks ago, I got to do some projects that they needed help with. But the very best thing I did was to hold Karen Alice. She would bring me books to

read to her, toys to play with her. And when I was holding her I don't know who was more comforted....her or me? She would point to me and I would say, I'm granpa...she would point to me and say PA. I would say where is Karen Alice and she would point to herself. Children learn that they are beloved named children of God when they are held by those who dearly love them. Karen Alice was nearly weaned. The Doctor told our daughter Tricia to keep breast-feeding her for another two weeks as she had just had the second vaccine and there is research now that the child may get some of the immunity through the mother's milk. But I want to tell you that that almost weaned child was anything but calm all the time. She doesn't walk anywhere, she runs. That's why I helped them fence in the backyard. She loves to eat all kinds of food. She loves to play with age appropriate games....over and over and over again. And mostly, she really loves Elmo!! Elmo can do no wrong.

So I started thinking how important the whole family is in the development of a child. Hilary Clinton used the African slogan "It Takes a Village to raise a Child." And if that is true, then wow the church has an incredibly important role in loving and caring for children. Moms and dads can't do it alone. Many have tried in this past year because of the pandemic. Moms have had to work, clean the house, cook meals and home school children. Dad's too have tried to work from home, while also managing the many needs of the family.

In the best of times, the church is a family full of moms, dads, grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles, who can love and nurture every child baptized into Christ our Lord. Last weekend I had a great reunion with my cousins. We started having yearly cousins' reunions when we lost our last aunt, My aunt Naomi on the Cope side of my family. We found we really love being together and when we do there is lots of eating of PA Dutch food, there are walks and games, but mostly there are very funny stories we tell and it helps us remember who we are. This year we were missing my brother Ernie, my cousin Yuggie and my cousin Randy who have all passed now. Our family circle is getting smaller. We spent

time remembering them, telling their stories, and by God's grace it started to feel like they were still with us.

I started thinking of another phrase...God the family. God can be whatever family member you need at a given time. Father, Son, yes...but also Mother, daughter, cousin, grandparent, aunt or uncle.....God's love for you, for each one of us is so big, that God can be your brother who has died. God can be the one who rocks you and comforts you when you are crying, grieving, feeling lost. God is the one who shouts hurray when you score a soccer goal or hit a home run. God the family loves you so much. The part of God closest to us is the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit can take many shapes and forms and is always present nearby.

There is an old African American Spiritual that I love:

I Thank You Jesus

(written by Kenneth Morris)

Verse 1:

(I thank You, Jesus) I thank You, Jesus.

(I thank You, Jesus) I thank You, Jesus.

I thank You, Jesus, I thank You Lord,  
oh, You've brought me from a mighty,  
a mighty long way,  
a mighty long way.

(I thank You, Jesus) I thank You, Jesus,  
(I thank You, Jesus) I thank You, Jesus,  
I thank You, Jesus, I thank You Lord;  
oh, You've brought me from a mighty,  
a mighty long way,  
a mighty long way.

Verse 2:

(You've been my mother) You've been my mother,  
(You've been my father) You've been my father,  
You've been my sister, my brother too;  
oh, You've brought me from a mighty,  
a mighty long way,  
a mighty long way.

(You've been my doctor) You've been my doctor,  
(You've been my lawyer) You've been my lawyer,  
You've been my teacher, my friend indeed;  
oh, You've brought me from a mighty,  
a mighty long way,  
a mighty long way.

Verse 3:

(You've been my bread) You've been my bread,  
(You've been my water) You've been my water,  
You've been my life, my everything,  
oh, You've brought me from a mighty,  
a mighty long way,  
a mighty long way.

(You've been my bread) You've been my bread,  
(You've been my water) You've been my water,  
You've been my life, my everything,  
oh, You've brought me from a mighty,  
a mighty long way,  
a mighty long way.

You've been my mother, been my mother  
You've been my father, been my father

Been my sister, my brother too,  
oh, you've brought me from a mighty,  
a mighty long way.

That's the essence of a day like today. It is to stop and give thanks to a God who has brought us a mighty long way because of the people who gave birth to us, the mother's who adopted us, the grandparents and church members who have been bread and water to us. They have loved us, cared for us, helped us to know this Jesus who is so much like a Good Shepherd and a mother all at the same time. The mother's in our lives have helped us to know right from wrong; good from bad; and smart from dumb. And more they have helped us know we are a deeply loved baptized child of God. (don't say Amen)