

“Like A Child At Its Mother’s Breast”

Theology as Lullaby

Psalm 131 Philippians 4:4-7

How does one preach a lullaby? That is what this psalm 131 is, a lullaby, a tender and intimate night-time psalm. It is the song of one who has been given the peace that passes all understanding. If we were to pray it as our own, perhaps we would sleep better at night—and rise with more hope in the morning.

It may be a bit risky for a preacher to begin a sermon by talking about lullabies and sleep, your eyes already beginning to close for a few winks of 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.

Nevertheless, we proceed.

I

Psalm 131 is a psalm of trust. They are among our favorites: Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Psalm 27: “The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?” Psalm 121: It begins, “I lift up my eyes to the hills—where will my

help come from?” Then it ends, “The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forever more.”

We could arrange the psalms of trust into two groups: male and female. Some use masculine images of God; others use feminine images of God. The masculine psalms I call “Fortress” psalms, like Psalm 46: “God is our refuge and our strength”, from which we get Luther’s great hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

The feminine psalms of trust I call “Wings” psalms:

Keep me as the apple of your eye,
hide me in the shadow of your wings

(Ps. 17:8)

Salvation in these psalms is pictured as being in the safe and nurturing wings of God, as a child nestled at its mother’s breast, or, to use Jesus’ words, like a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings.

Today’s psalm is a psalm of trust in the feminine mode. God is a mother in whose arms we are nursed and loved, calmed comforted and secure. It is theology as lullaby.

A lullaby is one of the most poignant expressions of human connection and trust. Can you imagine a more serene moment than a room where a mother is rocking and nursing her child, or a parent singing a lullaby to their child?

The psalmist was a developmental psychologist before his (or her) time. The noted psychologist Erik Erickson says that the great developmental task of a child in the first 18 months is “Trust vs. Mistrust”. This first 18 months, he writes, establish to a remarkable degree whether we walk through life with a basic sense of trust or mistrust, whether we are “at-ease” in the world”, or whether we suffer the “dis-ease” of compromised trust.

We may question the degree to which these first 18 months make that kind of difference, but I think our basic sense of trust is formed early. Parents can in their nurture of their child “make the way of the Lord” smooth or difficult for a child, encourage or impede the spiritual capacity for trust. And so can the church in its nurture of the children of the church.

The psalmist expresses this deepest form of faith called trust in these words:

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

There's a most beautiful anthem by Eric Whitacre called "The Seal Lullaby." It is based on a poem by Rudyard Kipling:

Oh, hush there, my baby,
The night is behind us,
And black are the waters that sparkled so green.
The storm shall not wake thee
No shark overtake thee
Asleep in the arms of the slow swirling sea.

As the ocean storms of our lives come, there is peace in the storm, for there is peace beneath the storm and peace above the storm.

III

Psalm 131 is, however, not for the spiritual life of children alone, for the young ones given the gift of trust. It is a song of a mature, seasoned faith, a faith that has experienced the heart breaks, bewilderments and ship-wrecks of life.

It pictures what one spiritual writer called "the simplicity on the yonder side of complexity." This side of complexity it is merely simplistic. Sometimes in church we get not "theology as lullaby", but "theology as morphine."

Who has not experienced a kind of disorientation these last few years? We feel like the character in *Green Pastures*: "Everything nailed down is coming

loose.” Any traumatic event can cause disorientation. We wrack our brains, our hearts to make sense of it, to find some equilibrium in the midst of it.

In this psalm, the psalmist has run into life’s limitations and his own. He has reached his impasse. And now he writes:

O, Lord
my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great, nor marvels beyond me.

He is like Job at the end of *Job*. He has been crushed in ways that make no sense to him; and the pious platitudes of his friends have only made things worse. He cries out to God to speak to him, and God spoke from a whirlwind with an avalanche of questions too mind-boggling to answer. And Job says:

...I have uttered what I did not understand, things too enormous and unfathomable, which I did not know.

The psalmist has now a humility of heart; he has learned his ignorance. He finds, strangely perhaps, comfort in his limitations. He discovers a trust that is deeper than the mind can reach. So now he says,

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.

Is there a place beyond worry, beyond bafflement and despair? Yes there is, and God wants to move us there, to a peace beyond all understanding, a peace that Paul says, “stands guard over our hearts and minds....”(Philippians 4:4-7)

Jesus lived with such trust in his *Abba*, in an intimacy, trust and confidence in his relationship with his God. When the tide turned against him, he prayed a prayer of *thanksgiving* of all things, and trusted his life and the life of the world into the good-pleasure of God who would make all things right and all things good. On the cross as he hung dying at the hands at the hands of the Roman Imperium, he prayed with his last breath the night-time prayer of every Hebrew child, a verse from Psalm 31:

Abba, into your hands I commit my spirit. (Luke 23:46, Psalm 31:5)

“Now I lay me down to sleep.”

IV

Perhaps psalms are best interpreted by poems, for poetry reaches places deeper than our minds, to places where, as one mystic put it “the mind descends

into the heart.” Here are two that express the simplicity beyond complexity, peace in the storm, trust in the “faithfulness at the heart of things.”

The first is Wendell Berry’s poem “The Peace of Wild Things.”

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives might be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.¹

The second is a song by songwriter Sara Groves.

You will lose your baby teeth.
At times, you’ll lose your faith in me.
You will lose a lot of things,
But you cannot lose my love.

You may lose your appetite,
Your guiding sense of wrong and right.
You may lose your will to fight,
But you cannot lose my love.

You will lose your confidence.
In times of trial, your common sense.
You may lose your innocence,
But you cannot lose my love.

Many things can be misplaced;
Your very memories be erased.
No matter what the time or space,
You cannot lose my love.
You cannot lose,
You cannot lose,
You cannot lose my love

This is God's song. Sing it to yourself. Listen to the lullaby God is singing to you.