

## **Help! I'm an Angry Two Year Old Trapped in an Adult's Body**

Psalm 131

- <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.

It's Springtime in Israel in the first century. You've never gone further than 10 miles away from your village your whole life, but you've been saving and saving forever to make a once in a lifetime trip- to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover. And this is the year. Your family has been making preparations for months. And when the time comes, you rise up early in the morning while the mist still clings to the hill country around you. You say morning prayers, and feed your crying, hungry little one. You shovel a little breakfast into your mouth, and then your whole family hits the road with the others who are already going up- going up to Jerusalem.

Three times a year Deuteronomy says. Three times a year there shall be a festival in Jerusalem. Fifty days after Passover is Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks, also called Pentecost. This is when the priests carry the harvest into the temple to be blessed. In the Fall there is the Festival of Booths, called Sukkoth. The people create these outdoor structures to remember their time in the wilderness after the Exodus. But the main festival, the granddaddy of them all, the BCS Championship Bowl festival, the one that everyone wants to go for- that's Passover. Every Jew wanted once in their life at least to walk the dusty roads and go up to Jerusalem and join this

week long festival of festivals commemorating their hard won freedom from an oppressive dictator.

And was it exciting. Seeing the city for the first time. The crowds. The vendors selling food to pilgrims. The buildings crowding around you blocking out the sky. And in the middle of everything, towering above all else- the temple itself. God's own house.

Exciting is an understatement. But Passover in the first century isn't just exciting- it's also dangerous. Imagine, thousands of pilgrims all filling the streets, all there to remember one things- that once upon a time they stood up to the man. They fought the law, and the law lost. They were all there to remember how Moses towered before Pharaoh and roared: "Let my people go." And then how he led them through the sea, and how it parted for them, but crushed Pharaoh's army who raced after them. And with the Roman eagle now flying over Jerusalem, it didn't take a magi to figure out who the new Pharaoh was.

And this is why every year the Roman governor of Jerusalem saddled his war horses and gathered his men, and he rode in a triumphal parade of power into the city from the West gate. It was a naked display of military might. It was a show of force to remind the pilgrims that Moses was dead, that Rome was far more powerful than Egypt ever dreamed of being, and they had better not try anything.

Passover was a tinderbox. And there you are with your family- your baby just barely weaned. It's your once-in-a-lifetime trip to Jerusalem, and your heart beats as much from the anticipation of celebrating Passover in the Holy City as much as it does from the glint off the Roman gladii, those brutal swords that have silenced so many of your fathers and brothers.

And with all of these powerful emotions- religious fervor, excitement, anger, fear. Words just can't do justice to all this. Only music. Only music can even hope to give shape to all this. And you sing the song that is our text for this morning- Psalm 131.

Psalm 131 is from a special collection of songs known as the Psalms of Ascent. There are fifteen of them in all beginning with Psalm 120. They are called the Psalms of Ascent, because they were sung by pilgrims, like the one we've been imagining, as they traveled up to Jerusalem to worship.

These Psalms of Ascent are all short- this one is only three verses long. This makes them easy to memorize- easy to sing on the long journey. Most of them constantly refer to Jerusalem or Zion, the temple mount. And in terms of texture they move back and forth between an individual singing and then the group- giving us a kind of call and response as a group would head down the road.

And this one, Psalm 131, it fits in well with the others. You can tell it's a Psalm of Ascent. But there's also something unusual about it. The voice. The perspective. Psalm 131 is written from the perspective of a woman. The psalm is written by a woman with a young child joining the crowds as they pour into Jerusalem.



She sings: *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. 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.*

*O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high.* Normally, it's a good thing for our hearts to be lifted up. We say that every time we celebrate Holy Communion- lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord. But not here. The Psalmist sings that her heart is not lifted up; her eyes are not raised too high. And it's a surprising way to open- you can't tell whether she's sad, or troubled, or what's happening. But then she sings:

*I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother.* And then you realize she isn't depressed. She's at peace. Her head isn't filled with big news- with troubles beyond her scope. She isn't even worried about her things-to-do list for the week. No, she is just focused on the road beneath her feet, on being present right where she is. She has quieted herself- quieted her soul.

And then most interesting thing: *My soul is like the weaned child that is with me.* Just like that, in one line this Psalm goes from the nice to the extraordinary. My soul is like the weaned child that is with me. Right here. With ME. Her soul isn't like just any weaned child- she says it's like the child that she is carrying with her, whose warm body is snuggling up to her, maybe even as she's writing the verse.

POSITIVE that only King David wrote the Psalms, or at least a MAN, people have had a hard time with this last line. For while many things have changed in terms of the roles of men and women in the last 2,500 years- women still have the corner on the market on breast feeding. The only people who wean children are mothers and nursemaids. Period. So today's scholars point out the obvious: this psalm is written by a woman.

But it has been so hard for translations to admit this. For centuries translators have simply tortured the Hebrew into trying to make it not say this. Almost every translation you'll find, from the noble King James to the less noble but better marketed NIV all try to avoid making it sound like the Psalmist is weaning a child- and all to avoid giving even the appearance that a woman might have anything to DO with writing Holy Scripture.



But to miss this is to miss the entire point of this fascinating song.

Most of us think of the soul as this kind of wonderful, glowing, luminescent part of us. From Pythagoras to Plato people have believed that our bodies are this crude flesh that sags and deteriorates, but our souls- our souls are these eternal parts of us that will live on long after our bodies have returned to dust.

Last week Steve Ristow when he was talking about adults with developmental disabilities touched on this when he said so movingly that while there may be physical differences between the able bodied and adults with developmental disabilities- underneath God fashioned our souls all the same. And no matter what we look like on the outside- our souls are each made in the image of God. And I one hundred percent agree with him on this. I just really loved not only what he said but how he gave us his heart, too.

But I also love how the Psalmist here shows us another side of the soul. Instead of being like this beautiful, perfect, peaceful part of us- she says the soul is more like a fussy child inside of us. Our souls are like these growing, changing kids- just weaned, in process. What used to

comfort them isn't working any more. And it's all we can do to hold this part close, trying to figure out what will calm it, and never quite fully understanding.

I love this, because it's so different than how we talk about the soul and spirituality most of the time. Most of the time the way we talk about this stuff is just about enough to give you cavity. People who talk about the soul get this weird, super calm voice, and they seem to be always wearing yoga pants, and surrounding themselves with candles, and it feels SO removed from real life to me.

The Psalmist says you want to do soul work? Then roll up your sleeves. Because it's hard. It's messy. The soul isn't always this beautiful, serene part of you. It's often like an angry baby- ready for solids but not quite done with the nipple.

Our hardest baby was Will. Whether it was us just not knowing what to do and being anxious, or just the way he was, he wound up being a colicky little guy for a while. If you are blessed not to know what that is, colic is this word doctors made up to describe a baby who cries a lot and they don't know why. People just like to have names for things. It makes us feel better. And I just have these memories of getting up in the middle of the night and putting on the Baby Bjorn and walking up and down our street in the muggy Austin night. Some nights I wouldn't even put shoes on, and I could feel the still warm pavement under my feet, as I'd pat his back and quietly sing to him my favorite hymn: *Be Thou My Vision. Be thou my vision O Lord of my heart. Nought be all else to thee save that thou art. Thou my best thought by day or by night. Waking or sleeping thy presence my light. By day or by night. Waking or sleeping. I always have loved that hymn, but those nights with little Will opened new octaves of depth and meaning to me.*

And the Psalmist says this is what it's like to be human and have a soul- to have this living part inside of us. Sometimes maybe these parts inside of us are at peace. Sometimes maybe we are happy to with who we are, and what we're doing in life, and where we're living. But so many times even though we can't even explain it, even though we know in our heads we should be OK, we should be happy- in our inmost beings, in our souls, there is unrest. There is struggle. And it's work trying to find some peace. It's hard. And what used to soothe us may not work anymore- we might have to find a new path.



This week I came across the story of a person who knew as much about this as anyone who has ever lived I believe. You may have heard of her- her name is Ruby Bridges. In 1960 Ruby was 6 years old and living in New Orleans. She was the very first African-American child to attend what used to be a whites only school.

When Ruby Bridges walked up the stone steps to William Frantz Elementary school, she was flanked by strange men wearing badges and yellow arm bands marking them as federal marshals. And she had to pass through a sea of grown ups. Only these adults weren't telling her to have a great day. They weren't telling her to study hard. These were white adults, moms and dads just like me, and with their faces contorted with rage, they shouted at her as she walked into her school. In one image captured forever one woman manages a horrific smile as she holds out a white scarf screaming out a threat to strangle this little 6 year old girl. Six years old.

The marshals were amazed by her. She never cried, they said. She never even whimpered. She held her head high as she passed through that mob. Her teacher, an incredibly special woman named Barbara Bridges, the first white woman Ruby ever met and spent time

with, watched Ruby from inside every morning as she made her way inside. And as the crowds grew she saw something no one else did. She noticed Ruby's mouth moving as she walked. And when Ruby came inside Mrs. Bridges asked her about this. She said Ruby I saw you talking out there. You weren't talking to them were you. Ruby denied it. I wasn't talking she'd say. But one day Mrs. Bridges was absolutely certain. Ruby, she said, when the little came inside. I saw you talking. You have to tell me- what were you saying.

And this little girl, this little six year old girl said, "Mrs. Bridges, I wasn't talking. I was praying." "You were praying?" her teacher said, astounded. "What were you praying for?" "I was asking God to forgive them, because they didn't know what they were saying."

That six year old little girl, every day had to make her way through adults trying to frighten and intimidate her- she managed to calm her soul, which had to be in turmoil, even to the point of praying for these people so full of hate.



Most of us don't have to face what Ruby did when we wake up in the morning. But all of us have things to do that are hard. We all work and live with people that are frustrating- and maybe threatening. And my prayer for us is that we may find ways to calm our souls when they are troubled, and that we may be gentle with our neighbors, especially when we can see they are struggling inside, just like we do. **Amen.**