

Isaiah 49:8-16
Matthew 6:24-34
Psalm 131

We Are Weaned, But Still Near

Please hear the sermon scripture for today, Psalm 131, and while listening or reading along, please keep in mind that most of the recent theological analysts have accepted that the author is a woman, or is at least quoting a woman.

A Song of Ascents. Of David

- 1O 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.
- 2But 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.
- 3O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore.

Imagine this for a moment, a mother and small child curled up together, warm and glowing, looking at each other and feeling the wonder and the curiosity – the trust and adoration. There is nothing else in the world for these two but each other. The mother is lost in the moment. What an amazing creation. How did the fingers get so small? Was my skin ever that pure? What will this child develop into? And then there are just those overwhelming moments where no thoughts at all are there – just pure awe. She will never have an opportunity to experience anyone else's life – besides her own – as she does and will with this child.

The child knows no other as intimately as he or she does this woman, this child was conceived and grown inside her. He knows her heartbeats, knows her voice, he even knows the gurgling of her intestines! This child has been nurtured by her, cared for by her, nursed by her. And now this child has been weaned. He is no longer dependent only on her for his survival. He is free of his total dependency on her – and yet – there is still this longing for the two to be with each other.

This psalm is comparing this relationship to that of humanity and God. We are separate from each other – yet most content when spending time with each other intimately. We are made in God's image – as though we came from God's womb – and Christ's life showed us that God wants nothing more than to be with us. This Psalm hints that the act of mothering is comparable to the divine's relationship to us.

And it doesn't even have to be the birth mother – Mothers who make their child's needs and desires greater than their own are performing sacred acts. For God does the same for us. From our OT lesson: Isaiah 49:15-16: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands . . ."

The Psalmist here has started out by saying, "LORD, my heart is not haughty, nor my eyes lofty." Basically she is placing herself in the position of the child in her arms. Mother is not haughty to God – the mother is listening attentively – she is close to God, and the implication here is that the child, similarly, is not haughty to the mother. "1O 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. "

Theologian April Berends writes about this distance between God and humanity and between Mother in child, and points out that "distance is heightened when the child becomes haughty, forgetting that his knowledge is less complete than that of the mother." Our human tendencies toward self promulgation distances us from God. As Adam & Eve ate of the tree of knowledge they got kicked out of Paradise. In other words, as they got haughty desiring to know as much as God, they separated themselves.

Last Wednesday in Bible study we discussed many things, but one point which I found most exciting was when we discussed the concept of obeying God found in Philippians 2:12. We discussed the idea of God wanting us to *obey* him – it seemed like a force that wasn't of a kindly nature, we in our all American, freedom-loving, independence took umbrage to the seemingly violent force of the word OBEY. And then Pat Bush brought out the Greek dictionary and we looked up the word that was used – hupakouo (hoop-ak-oo'-o). It means to "hear under" – as a subordinate – to listen attentively by implication it means to heed or conform – to hearken . . .

That is what the psalmist is referring to here – as the mother listens to the cooing of the baby for the sounds of his breathing and learning to make new sounds – as the baby listens to the voice of his mother, applying them to his memory so that he may one day converse with her – that is how we obey God – listening intently. Being humble enough to know we have much to learn and fixing our attention on God.

And we know that God is fixed on us. From our Gospel: Matthew 6:32-34, “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

According to Rev. Lisa M. Wolfe, Psalms 120-134 are all “Songs of Ascent” – but not all mention King David as this one does. Furthermore she describes these ‘Songs of Ascent’ as having a variety of possible meanings. They could have meant songs that were prescribed to be actually sung during a pilgrimage up Mount Zion to honor Yahweh at festival times. Or they could refer to a return to Jerusalem from exile; it could refer to the heightened poetic structure of these Psalms or could refer to an even a now unknown musical setting. We don’t really know what the superscription of David really means

It could mean that it was written during his reign, but could be just dedicated to him. But for a moment imagine what would it mean to spirituality, if these words had actually come from him? Imagine this powerful warrior, this energetic political machine who was willing to commit murder for his sexual pleasure – imagine this man with such empathy and understanding of the relationship between a mother and her baby . . . and between God and humanity - this great man ascribing lowliness.

Another interesting point here, in this “Song of Ascent” is the contrast to the profound lowliness of the psalmist. It reminds me of the Magnificat – the song that was attributed to Mary when she discovered she would bear God’s child.

Luke 1:46-55, Mary’s Song of Praise:

46 And Mary* said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
 50 His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
 51 He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
 53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
 54 He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.’

On this second to last Sunday in Epiphany, we are still returning to the birth of our Lord. We are to God as Jesus was to Mary when he was weaned. He was no longer dependent but the bond was there.

When we ponder why God gave us free will, perhaps we need to keep this picture in mind - we are weaned, but still near.