

Sermon on Psalm 131

Psalm 131: Lord, I have given up my pride and turned away from my arrogance. I am not concerned with great matters or with subjects too difficult for me. Instead, I am content and at peace. As a child lies quietly in its mother's arms, so my heart is quiet within me. Israel, trust in the Lord Now and forever!

Prayer:

O come, Holy Spirit; come as the fire and burn; come as the wind and cleanse; come as the light and reveal; come as the water and refresh. Convict, convert, and consecrate us, until we are wholly yours. Amen

My favorite book of prayers is Children's Letters to God, compiled by Eric Marshall and Stuart Hample. I like these prayers because they are short, honest, profound, and humorous. Listen to a few examples.

Dear God,

If you do all these things you are pretty busy. Now here's my question. When is the best time I can talk to you? I know you are always listening but when will you be listening hard in Troy, New York?

Sincerely yours,

Allen

Dear God,

Are boys better than girls? I know you are one but try to be fair.

Sylvia

Dear God,

I am the only one in my class who is Chinese. They all say that you are American but, I am too, so you could be Chinese right?

Your friend,

Kim

Dear God,

What is it like when you die? Nobody will tell me. I just want to know, I don't want to do it.

Your friend,

Mike

Dear Mr. God,

How do you feel about people who don't believe in You? Somebody else wants to know.

A friend,

Neil

Those prayers show us uninhibited trust. They bring to mind the prayer that is given in Psalm 131.

The Psalmist had been through a fierce and fiery inner battle. When he laid down his weapons and stopped fighting, he rested himself in the Lord. He had wrestled with selfish ambition and arrogance and emerged with a new definition of greatness. Greatness is humility. And humility comes from trust in God. And God enables us to trust Him, as we give our lives over to Him.

“Lord, I have given up my pride and turned away from my arrogance....I am content and at peace... Israel, trust in the Lord, now and forever.”

The Psalmist doesn't tell us just how he got hooked on power and prestige. But that is not important. Each of us could tell our own stories of arrogance and pride. I'm going to tell you one of my own.

Four years ago I faced an inescapable moment of truth. It was something I was certain would never happen to me. I was about to become 50 years old. I had skipped past thirty and slid under forty, so the trauma that fifty put me through was unexpected and insulting.

It was the realization of that big moment of transition, when I was about to discover that even I am really going to die – not soon hopefully, but sooner and with definite certainty.

But there was something else, something I had been carrying as heavy baggage for several years, it was a sense of unrealized fame. Before and during my early years in ministry, some people had built me up as the Harry Emerson Fosdick of the future, at least that's what I heard them saying. When I was in high school, my pastor's spouse says that to every person who decides to become a professional minister. But somehow I really took that seriously. In seminary one of my profs had written on one of my sermons: “There are few outstanding preachers on the horizon, but you are one.” As I listened to those comments, and a few others like them, I became almost compulsive about being a great preacher. And I equated greatness with fame. My dream was to become Pastor of Riverside Church in New York City.

Yet, at the same time, I was unable to pursue such a goal with shameless abandon. I could not bring myself to climb the ecclesiastical ladder as fast as possible, opting instead for an innovative, in-depth style of ministry in each church that I served.

Then, at age 47, I responded to a relentless nudging from God and made the move to start The Center for Christian Growth, a Center for communion with God and compassion to people, which serves churches. I have loved working with the Center, now more than ever. But the steps toward my fiftieth birthday kept reminding me that something was missing in somebody's script for Bill Vamos.

I sought advice and listening ear from a friend. My friend said: “I hope you can say goodbye to other people's dreams for you.” That was really a good word, but the question was, “How”?

About a month before my fiftieth birthday, I went on a retreat. One of the scriptures that our leader suggested was Psalm 131.

During the first period of praying in solitude on our retreat, I read the Psalm. I'm going to share with you a dialogue prayer that describes what happened as I prayed with that passage of Scripture. For me a dialogue prayer includes what I say to God and what I perceive God is saying to me.

Bill: Dear Lord, I never expected to encounter you this way. But surprise gave way to clarity as I read the first sentence of Psalm 131: “Lord, I have given up my pride.” Do you know what is astonishing? I did not argue with that passage this time. I really want to do it.

God: Good, good for you. Now your first step is to use a few less words when you talk to me.

Bill: Okay, the next word that invigorated me, Lord was even better. I heard the psalmist celebrate You, and what You did for him: He uses words like “contentment”, and “peace”. I see what I have wanted in my hurting over unfulfilled predictions of personal fame. It’s the approval of the people who told me how great I ought to be. But the approval that I really crave is yours, Lord. As I rest in You, I realize that I already have your approval. It comes to me as love and companionship. Thank you!

God: Again, too many words, Bill. Try it with a few less.

Bill: Lord, the center of life is You. And Your love for me and for everyone else in Christ Jesus. Amen.

In that experience I discovered that God enables us to rest everything that we are in Him. I still seek to achieve and to be affirmed and I am thankful that I do. But something new is happening. I am beginning to embrace the Psalmists’ definition of greatness. Greatness is humility. And humility comes for trust in God. And God enables us to trust Him as we give our surging struggling lives over to Him. The Psalmists’ faith is our faith too.

Israel, trust in the Lord now and forever!

That last verse encourages Israel to place her trust in God, day after day after day. One person’s journey from pride to trust becomes the faith venture of the people of God. Psalm 131 is a painting in words for a whole community to draw into itself over and over again.

God’s reliable love is for Israel, and indeed, for everyone. As George A.F. Knight has written: Through putting his trust in God, the Psalmist has learned to reflect the very nature of God in this world of strife and pain; and then to (proclaim) God’s “motherly love” to all those who are in need of comfort and care.

....As a child lies quietly in its mother’s arms, so my heart is quiet within me.

“Through the love of my Son, I will enable you to rest everything that you are in Me.”

Arnold Prater tells the story of a certain province in Japan, many centuries ago, in which the crops failed because of a drought and that autumn famine was imminent. So the emperor decreed that all persons over the age of seventy years must be destroyed in order that the young might live through the winter.

Sorrowfully one man in the village picked up his aged and weakened mother and began to search for a place in which he could take her life and bury her. He climbed slowly and painfully to the top of a high mountain to a clearing in the woods. He tenderly laid his mother upon the ground and rested for a moment before doing what he had been order to do.

“One thing, Mother,” he asked, “Why did you keep tearing bits of your shawl loose as we came up to this place?”

And the weakened mother replied, “I wanted you to be able to find yur way back down the mountain!”

Mr. Prater then concludes by saying: “Could God do this for us? Would God do this? Yes. We even carried Him up a mountain outside an ancient city and there we crucified Him. But He has scattered some signs all along the way so we could find our way back to Him!”

Through putting his trust in God, the psalmist has learned to reflect the very nature of God in this world of strife and pain; and then to proclaim God’s “motherly love” to all those who are in need of comfort and care.

...As a child lies quietly in its mother’s arms. So my heart is quiet within me.”

When we nurture a regular prayer life, we can have the same kind of relationship with God, which the Psalmist had. We can be with Him like children resting in their mother’s arms.

What is it like for a child to rest in its mothers arms?

When a baby is born, he leaves the security of its mother’s womb, and is thrust out into a new environment, a place of bright lights, numerous sounds, and coldness. The immediate change must be frightening.

But when the baby is wrapped in a warm blanket and placed in its mother’s arms, he feels the tenderness, warmth, love, and hears her soft soothing voice. Knowing that he is not alone, a sense of peace, contentment, and trust replaces the fear of the unknown. And as the mother continues to nurture the child, she becomes the center of his life. So it is in our relationship with God.

The poet said it in words of power.

Can a mother’s tender care?
Ceast toward the child she bare?
Yes, she may forgetful be.
Yet, will I remember thee.

Mine is an unchanging love
higher than the heights above.
Deeper than the depths beneath.
Free and faithful.
Strong as death.

Israel, trust in the Lord, now and forever!