



First Sunday of Advent - December 1, 2013
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Legacy: A legacy of Peace Psalm 131

For those of you who are visiting us this morning, we have been living in the Psalms of Ascent for the last couple of months. That's a collection of 15 psalms that were sung by Jewish pilgrims as they made their way up to Jerusalem. These songs were sung as they returned home after decades in exile in the super power of their time, Babylon. But they were also sung in happier times like when they were traveling up to Jerusalem for the great festivals of their faith.

Christmas is one of our great festivals of faith. So we are going to continue our journey through the final few Psalms of Ascent as we begin this season we call Advent. Advent means "coming" and the four weeks of Advent help us to experience to the "coming" of Jesus; his coming to earth as a baby at Bethlehem... his coming into the heart of every person who welcomes him...and his one-day coming back to earth as he promised he would. Advent is about looking back and looking forward, about the legacy of faith we have received and the legacy of faith we hand on to our children and grandchildren.

This morning we lit a candle of peace, and that is a legacy we find in psalm 131. It is one of the shortest psalms in the Bible... only 3 verses long. But as the English preacher Charles Spurgeon once said, "It is one of the shortest psalms to read, but one of the longest to learn."

The prophet Isaiah promised that the Messiah who was to come would be the "Prince of Peace." Today's psalm asks the question, "How do we find that peace? How do we find contentment in our lives?" And here is its answer: "By navigating your way in life between two extremes." And we find these extremes in this psalm.

The first extreme is described in verse 1: "My heart is not proud, O Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me." Do you hear the extreme that the psalmist is warning against? Pride. Pride is the mother of all sin. Have you ever thought of that? It was pride that drove the angel Lucifer to lead a rebellion against God and it got him cast out of heaven. It was pride that drove Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit so that they could be like God, and it got them cast out of Eden. Pride is the belief that we are greater than we are...and the hunger to be greater still.

Pride always grades on the curve; it is always comparing itself to others. For pride to swell, it needs someone less than itself. Pride looks with disdain upon its inferiors. And that's where the eyes come in. "Haughty eyes," the psalmist writes. Pride is the inner state of the heart, and the eyes are the warning lights that reveal what's going on inside. Proverbs 30: 13 describes haughty eyes vividly: "There are those—how lofty are their eyes, how high their eyelids lift!" Do you see it in your mind's eye?

The heart harbors pride. The haughty eyes reveal pride. Then the psalmist goes on to describe what pride pursues: "...great matters...things too wonderful for me." The proud heart is ambitious. It wants to do great things, not as a service to God or God's creation...but as a competition with God. Pride's ambition longs to make a name for itself...longs to draw attention to itself...longs to be a big shot.

But wait a second: isn't ambition a good thing? Isn't it the driving force of our American culture? Well...yes, it is. But there is a difference between ambition and aspiration. Aspiration is the desire to accomplish all that God wants me to accomplish; the desire to be fully the person God created me to be. Aspiration is a healthy dissatisfaction with mediocrity; a passion to do one's very best. But ambition is the toxic extreme of aspiration. A desire to create or meddle in something great, not to direct honor to our God, but to redirect some of His honor to myself.

I squirm when I read this psalm because it dredges up stuff about my past that I don't like about me. In the early years of ministry, I battled pride. I wanted to make a name for myself. I wanted to make a mark. I remember having this as one of my goals: I wanted to walk into a room full of the most prominent pastors in our denomination...and have them know my name. "Look, there's Mark Toone." That was pride. I wanted to be known. I wanted to be important. And the irony is, when I reached the point where the people who I thought were big shots did know me, I remember thinking, "That's it? That's what I was working so hard for?" It was pretty disappointing, really. And the older I have become, the more unrewarding I have discovered pride to be. Pride is full of empty calories.

So, on one extreme end of life, the psalmist paints a man driven by pride, full of disdain, who longs to be a player; a big shot in all the important things that are not his business. He doesn't think he needs God; in fact, he views God as being in competition with him. He wants to be able to call the shots and get credit for his accomplishments. This is a warning that has Gig Harbor written all over it. We are a community filled with movers, shakers, decision-makers... important people. And the psalmist warns that if we pursue that naked ambition as the identity of our lives... we will be disappointed. We will not find the sense of peace and purpose we long for.

But the other extreme is no better! On the other end of the continuum is the picture of a nursing baby. Could you imagine a greater contrast with the prideful

power broker than a nursing baby? Surely the image of a child at its mother's breast represents a picture of true peace and contentment, right? Actually...not right. There is peace and contentment only so long as that baby's needs are being met. Isn't that so? What is more self-centered than a nursing child? Helpless, clinging, utterly focused on its own needs.

Every person who becomes a Christian begins in a place of extreme dependency. It is all so new, this idea of having a relationship with God... this idea that Jesus loves us and died to save us, this idea that we can talk to God and he will answer our prayers. We are excited in those early days of faith, but we are also incredibly needy. Which is okay; that's part of our spiritual journey.

But the scriptures, and particularly Paul, warn that we must move beyond that nursing stage—beyond spiritual milk—to a place of spiritual maturity and strength. Otherwise, we end up as “neurotically dependent Christians” seeing God only as the one who meets our needs. (Peterson, p. 154)

Neither of these extremes—neither the spiritually arrogant power broker...nor the neurotically dependent Christian—offers the promise of a life of peace and contentment. What does, then? What is the image the psalmist offers to us understand the balanced, peace-filled spiritual life? It is that of a weaned child. Weaning is hard and painful. I remember when the doctor told us that Rachel was big enough to stop nursing. That first night, Rachel was screaming in her crib, Cyndi was bawling in bed next to me, and I had to literally throw my leg over the top of her to keep her from rushing to Rachel's rescue.

When you disturb that rhythm of utter dependency there is nothing peaceful about it. But it is the only way you will ever move to a deeper relationship... one that is no longer based simply on mother satisfying the needs of baby. Does that make sense? Only when the baby is weaned can the relationship mature into one where the child loves the mother for who she is...and longs to be with her for the sake of her love... not just because of what he can get from her.

Here is what the psalmist is trying to say: many of us treat our relationship with God like a nursing baby. The whole purpose—the only purpose of God—is to meet my needs. My relationship with him is based upon him fulfilling all of my wishes and wants. And as long as I see God in those immature terms I will never be able to love God for His own sake and experience His deeper love. Only when I am weaned—only when I get past viewing God as my Santa Claus in the sky who responds to my every wish list—will I enjoy the deeper relationship of love that Christ came to offer us.

Two extremes. The prideful person who resents God because that person wants to be the god of her own life...or the nursing baby who is so focused on take, take, taking from God that she lives a life of unhealthy, clingy, selfish dependency.

If you were to place yourself over the top of Psalm 131, where would you lie in that continuum? Are you the striver? Proud of your accomplishments, ambitious, driven to make a name for yourself and steal as much of God's thunder as you can? Or are you at the other end? Someone who is so spiritually dependent that you cling to the Lord, not for who He is but for what he can provide for you?

Listen once again to the psalmist who discovered a place of real peace, real contentment in his relationship with the Lord:

But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.

May I confess to you this morning, I am still learning what it means to rest in the Lord in this way; to simply enjoy him and love him and be loved by him. I get glimpses of this at times, but I know I am still not there... and I long to be there. Don't you? I long for the life of real peace that comes when I stop competing with God—stop striving for the great things that do not belong to me. And the peace that comes when I stop depending upon God only for what he can give me. I want to learn to simply enjoy God for who he is. And the psalmist sums it up in the last verse: ³⁰ *Israel, put your hope in the LORD both now and forevermore. Now... and forevermore.*

Communion is a picture of this very thing. It isn't baby food. It's for grown-ups. For Christians who know that we are dependent upon the Lord for our life, but who also know that we have been called to be a part of Christ's mission. We eat at this table not just to satisfy our needs but to strengthen us to do what God has called us to do. But we also eat at this table because Jesus invites us to be with him, to experience his love and favor and blessing and peace!

So who is invited to this meal? ...the prideful Christian who tries to compete with God for control of her life, and the dependent Christian who prefers to be coddled and cared for. All those on the extreme—and everyone in between—only to them, Jesus says, "Come. Eat. Enjoy this meal with me."

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- DIG DEEPER

1. Psalm 131 doesn't feel like a very good "fit" with our American culture. Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. What are the "high and great" things that you need to resist "occupying" yourself with? Why can they be bad for your soul?
3. What is the difference between a nursing and a weaned child and its mother? What does this suggest to you about your relationship with the Lord?