

That red book in your pews – the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* – includes all of the psalms. That’s because, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once put it, “the Psalter is the prayer of Christ for his Church, in which Christ stands in for us and prays on our behalf...”

That doesn’t literally mean that Bonhoeffer believed that Jesus wrote the psalms, any more than King David did. The psalms represent a *communal* effort over time: taken together they are more like the blue Hymnal in your pews than the rest of the Bible. Admittedly it is not always easy work to find singable settings for these psalms. But they are, most appropriately *sung* if we mean to understand how they were meant to function in shaping both Jewish and Christian faith. They cover every emotion you can imagine—from serene trust in God’s providential goodness to the rage and hurt of feeling like God has abandoned us to a pit. (That’s why singing those really hard psalms in pleasant Anglican chant just doesn’t work; those psalms really need some discord and could even be rapped, particularly those that mean to convey pathos, anger, injustice and despair.)

Bonhoeffer’s point is that Christ, like us in every way save sin, lived a *fully* human life—and experienced that whole range of human emotions. The fact that the last words he uttered, according to two of the gospel writers, were from Psalm 22 remind us that when we are feeling forsaken and lost and betrayed, we have a great high priest who has been there before us. Even those haunting Good Friday words - “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” - can lead to new life when we remember the healing and comfort and hope that Easter morning brings. Jesus stands in for us, and prays these words on our behalf, when that is where we are in our own journeys. And this of course goes to the very heart of what this lengthy Epiphany season has been all about: God-with-us.

So it is impossible to overestimate the importance of the psalms to Biblical faith. If you pray the Daily Office, it can be tempting to skip over those psalms (especially when they are long) to ‘the really important stuff’—the readings for the day. But the psalms themselves help to shape our prayers for the day. Walter Brueggeman used to teach a course I was privileged to take called “Earthy Spirituality” which was basically a course on the psalms. Brueggemann contended that the psalms keep us real and grounded, showing us the path toward a richer and more honest prayer life that doesn’t fall into the trap of being so heavenly minded that it becomes no earthly good.

This week I found myself drawn into the world of Psalm 131. As I began to explore it more deeply, I turned to a different translation. The translation we use in worship comes out of the BCP, an updated version of Miles Coverdale’s translations which date back to the sixteenth century. It’s not that I have anything against the BCP translation, but I wanted to try to hear this fairly familiar psalm in a new way, avoiding the cadences and even clichés to which I am accustomed. And so I turned to my Jewish Study Bible. That translation is also printed in your bulletins today and I want us to return to it again as I read this hymn/poem/prayer aloud one more time.

O LORD, my heart is not proud; nor my look haughty.
 I do not aspire to great things or to what is beyond me.
 But I have taught myself to be contented
 like a weaned child with its mother
 like a weaned child am I in my mind.
 O Israel, wait for the LORD, now and forever.

(Jewish Publication Society Translation)

The scholars tell us that this is a song of ascent. In Hebrew, the verb is *ma'alot*: “to go up.” These songs were sung by pilgrims making their way up to Jerusalem. And you literally do go “up” to Jerusalem. So as you travelled along toward the holy city, to the temple which housed the “holy of holies,” you sang these ascent psalms, which are all fairly short and therefore easily memorized. There are actually fifteen of them in a row, from Psalm 120 to Psalm 134. Probably the best known is 121:

I lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help?
My help cometh even from the Lord who hath made heaven and earth.

In Psalm 131, it’s impossible to miss this image of mother and child. Some argue that the poet here is a woman—not only because of this image but because from the very beginning of the psalm one can almost hear a female voice in a patriarchal society. The tone is almost apologetic, the tone of someone who wishes to make it clear that she is not too proud or haughty and does not aspire to too much greatness. But that doesn’t mean she does not know something about God and faith and prayer. Whoever wrote it, female or male, it is not a stretch to imagine a mother and child making their way to the Temple together as she quietly sings this song as a lullaby.

Whoever wrote it we can imagine Christ praying it on behalf of the Church. And perhaps even more importantly, as we continue to contemplate the icon of that Jewish mother, Mary, and her holy child in this season of light, we can perhaps imagine her singing this song to her son. We can let it take us more deeply into an earthier spirituality and a richer prayer life.

I think of Jesus, all grown up, when he tells that story of the two men who went up to Jerusalem to pray in the Temple: one was haughty and proud and took the opportunity to “thank God that I’m not like that tax collector over there.” While the tax collector, humbled and on his knees, simply asks for God’s grace and mercy and forgiveness. It seems to me that parable grows out of a deep understanding of what this Psalm 131 is all about.

It’s not a complicated prayer. Sometimes our faith, and our prayers, and our theology need to wrestle with ambiguity and complex questions, because we no doubt live in a complicated world and no doubt the life of faith sometimes raises hard questions. But there is also wisdom in true simplicity. As the old Shaker hymn puts it: *’tis a gift to be simple*. The ones who sing this song, male or female, know that God is trustworthy and that we glimpse this simple, yet profound, truth in the most ordinary moments of life.

When my children were very young, my most favorite thing in the world was come home on a Sunday afternoon to lie on the couch and watch a baseball game or a football game on TV with Graham or James resting on my chest. It wouldn’t take long for both of us to be asleep. Even thinking now of it, years later, brings a sense of peace and joy that passes understanding, and a glimpse into what I yearn for as I wait for the Lord.

Most waiting in my own life is not that peaceful. My kids are now old enough to feel more confident in mocking me and it is usually deserved. Last month while Graham was home from college, after James had a Central District concert at Mechanics Hall, we went out to dinner on Shrewsbury Street. We had more than an hour to wait since the restaurant doesn’t take reservations. Anyone who knows my family knows who was, by far, the most impatient one in that hour (which

in fact turned out to be more like 75 minutes!) In fact, as my kids bluntly put it: “Dad, you are the most impatient person I know in the world, except for Uncle Jimmy.” So can I say to you “do what I say, not what I do” when it comes to waiting for the Lord?

I am enough of a Biblical scholar to know that our waiting is intended to be more like that mother and child, or father and child, of this psalm and less like what I look like in a restaurant checking in with the hostess to see how much longer it will be. I know what it is we are called, to even if I’m not very good yet at living it. I am trying, with God’s help.

We are called to put our trust in the Lord, and to wait patiently. I think there is a lot of fear and anxiety in this world, and unfortunately, even in the name of Christ there are a lot of people who fan those flames. When we contemplate the end of human history, do we wait as anxious chickens with our heads cut off, or do we wait like the psalmist, “contented, like a weaned child with its mother?”

In this poem, we find true serenity and an acceptance of life on God’s own terms. Our culture tends to value autonomy and independence and self-sufficiency - and all of those no doubt have their places. But a weaned child is none of those things: a weaned child is utterly dependent. To wait like such a child is to be invited to let go of our need to control and our need to fix things. It is to simply be, by embracing the invitation to be God’s beloved, without obsessing about what will happen next.

Psalm 131 invites us to rest in God’s motherly care, and to wait for the Lord now and forever. That is not the whole story of the Christian life and faith. There are other psalms, for other days. But that’s a pretty good place to start, particularly as we begin to look toward the forty-day journey of Lent that is soon upon us. It’s a reminder to let God be God, and for us to remember that we truly are dust. Dust formed in the image of God, to be sure; dust that breathes in and out the very breath of God. But still dust. For Christians and Jews (and for that matter for Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus as well) humility is where the spiritual life begins. So do not be too proud, or too haughty, or too worried about understanding that which is beyond your comprehension. Rest, in the presence of God, like a child with her mother. Breath in and breathe out. Let go and let God.

Or as Jesus puts it in today’s Gospel reading: take it one day at a time. *Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.*