

Two Voices

Psalm 131

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My earliest memories of music come from the old jukebox my parents bought when I was young. Sitting in our basement rec room, my brothers and I would fight over who got to choose the next song, as we listened to the jukebox switch out one record for another.

Most of the jukebox songs I knew were from the 1950s and '60s, when 45s, the smaller records, were popular. I loved Jerry Lee Lewis, Elvis Presley, Ray Charles, and the Beatles, though my brothers were always on the hunt for any newer music they could find on records, so we did have the occasional Aerosmith or Styx record in the mix.

My all time favorite was "Respect," by Aretha Franklin, J6 on the jukebox. She sang with so much energy and passion that I couldn't resist playing it daily. Later in life I learned that Aretha Franklin did not originally write "Respect" but that it was actually recorded a couple of years earlier by Otis Redding. I was familiar with Otis from my parent's jukebox as well, having regularly played his mellow song, "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay," C3, throughout the summer months. I tried to imagine Redding as the original author of the song, but, even today, I have a hard time listening to his version of "Respect." Something is missing for me when I hear it from his voice rather than from Franklin's cover of the song.

Otis Redding wrote the song as a man's plea for respect from a specific woman. But Aretha Franklin...when Franklin's version of the song came out, it became a voice for women everywhere, a rallying cry for the growing women's liberation movement. It has a different power, a different message with the same words. Her rendition of the song was even used in rallies during the civil rights movement.¹ I think it's pretty natural to hear things differently coming from different voices. It's how cover bands get creative and how Shakespeare becomes modern. The way we hear a song or a story is dependant on the voice singing or telling the story.

Psalm 131, a song of Ascents, a song 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.

This text is one part of a group of psalms known as the "Songs of Ascent." As the Israelites journeyed to the great worship festivals in Jerusalem, scholars believe they sang Psalms 120-134.² On their way to the highest city in Israel, those making the pilgrimage had a long uphill hike in order to worship God, and these songs served, in a sense, as their road trip mix, the music set aside for their travels. They knew these songs by heart and sang them as part of their preparation for worship. Eugene

Peterson, in his commentary on the psalms of ascent, writes that “the ascent was not only literal, it was also a metaphor: the trip to Jerusalem acted out a life lived upward toward God.”³ These psalms played a role in preparing and modeling such a life.

This particular psalm is frequently thought of as a prayer to humble one’s heart.⁴ As one commentator writes, the psalm speaks an important word to those who internally struggle with arrogance, pride, and the need for recognition and honor⁵ The words of this psalm have long been understood as the voice of someone powerful seeking to walk humbly with God. There is no shortage of commentary throughout scripture warning against the evils of pride, especially when it comes hand in hand with power. Pride causes the downfall of kings and rulers and is called a disgrace in the book of Proverbs.⁶

During the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther claimed that pride was the primary sin causing people to turn away from God.⁷ Where, I wonder, does pride cross the line to be destructive to our faith? In elementary school choir, I remember learning the song “I’m Proud to Be an American.” Is that pride dangerous? What about the bumper stickers I’ve seen this week that say, “My Kid is an Honors Student” or “Proud UNC Alumni,” “Gay Pride” or “Asheville Pride”? Is this the kind of pride that Luther warns will turn us away from God?

Maybe, in order to understand the sort of pride a biblical author might warn against, we should consider the story of the psalm’s author. Almost half of the psalms in scripture, including this one, are attributed to David, a powerful king of Israel and an accomplished warrior, musician, and poet. Well known for defeating the giant, Goliath, as a boy, David is often remembered as one of the more righteous kings in Israel’s history, and yet David’s story is sprinkled with abuses of power and incredible mistakes. After having an affair with Bathsheba while her husband, Uriah, is out fighting a battle, Bathsheba learns that she is pregnant with David’s child. Rather than dealing with the brutal consequences of his affair, David arranges for Uriah to be “accidentally” killed in battle, leaving Bathsheba free to be with David.

David is a man who has learned all about the destructive power of pride, but here, in Psalm 131, we find his song of humility. In the face of God and community, he tells God that he has quieted his soul; he likens himself to an infant being carried by its mother, and his eyes are lowered in reverence.

Now, over the past half century, new scholarship has suggested that the author of this psalm was not David, but a woman, or at least an author quoting a woman.⁸ Reading the psalm again, the words take on a whole new set of emotions and meaning coming from an Israelite woman on a journey to worship God. She would not have been a liturgical leader in their worship experience, but rather a surprising voice singing out in prayer.

Psalm 131 – Voice of woman

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.

To speak out with prayers and words of hope for the whole community would

have been an unusual thing coming from a woman. Unlike David, the words, “I do not occupy myself with things too great for me,” coming from her mouth would not have been spoken as a rebuke of her more typically ambitious self, but rather would have signified a courageous choice to let her voice be heard.⁹ She almost apologizes for speaking, both to God and her community, *and yet something* compels her and does not allow her to remain silent.

Chances are good that pride is not something that this woman deals with on a day-to-day basis. She knows God’s love and compares her soul to a deeply cared-for child, quite possibly to a child that she carries with her on her journey ascending to worship in Jerusalem. She shares a message with the community of worshippers, encouraging them to hold onto eternal hope in the Lord. No, pride is most likely not her greatest temptation. It is possible that her temptation here would have been to keep silent when she had a word of hope for the community.

Feminist and womanist theologians have emphasized how, for the meek or powerless, pride is not the dangerous temptation that it may be for the powerful. Rather than pride, what this woman may have dealt with was a sin much less frequently talked about. The sin of shameful self-diminishing or self-belittling. It is the sin not of trying to take the place of God, but of failing to claim one’s identity as a child of God or believing the lie that the words God has given are not worth speaking.¹⁰ In her voice, the message may not be about humbling oneself, but rather a message of courageously stepping into one’s identity as a child of God and a voice of God’s hope.

Psalms are rarely preached on Sunday mornings. This may be for a number of reasons, but primarily, I think it’s because they are messy and very human. Walter Bruggeman writes, “The Psalms are the voice of our own common humanity – gathered over a long period of time.”¹¹ Our common humanity is not all that tidy. The Psalms are not the place to go when trying to learn theology. They are prayers and songs of people on a journey with God. At a conference I attended in November, I had the chance to visit with a pastor whom I greatly respect. He shared how, over the past year, he’s found it difficult to come up with words in his own prayer life. By the end of the day, or even at the start of his day, he feels at a loss for words. At the same time, he still desires to be in communion with God and has been able to do so with the help of the psalms. Rather than coming up with his own prayers, he’s been praying through the psalms. He can’t find his own life story detailed in the psalms and, at times, there are places where he feels disconnected from some of the words or images, but as he has read and prayed through this old prayer book, he’s found his deepest emotions wrapped up in the words of the writers.

The gift of the Psalms is the gift of a community of people to pray with, God’s people who have lived for thousands of years using these same words to express “common elation, shared grief, and communal rage.”¹² We are invited to pray these words among and with the authors and with our community “to express our solidarity in this anguished, joyous human pilgrimage.”¹³ The voice of the one who wrote any individual psalm might be less important than the fact that each psalm has been incorporated into a larger prayer book – a book that generations of God’s people have used to express their own deepest emotions, their joy and pain, their fear and their frustrations.

We don’t need to know the real story of the author who wrote Psalm 131 – it

may, in fact, get in the way of our ability to speak our own voices into the prayer. We might attribute it to David, allowing it to be for us a reminder of our call to walk humbly with God.

Or, if we attribute it to a common woman on her journey to the temple, the Psalm may be a prayer of encouragement to speak hope in an unexpected place, even if we are not sure our voice might be heard. Of course, it may also be something else entirely.

Let me end with a final thought from Walter Bruggemann, who wrote a book on praying the psalms. He writes,

The collection of the Psalter is not
for those whose life is one of uninterrupted continuity and
equilibrium.
Such people should stay safely in the Book of Proverbs,
which reflects on the continuities of life....

The Psalms are an assurance to us that when we pray and worship,
we are not expected to censure or deny the
deepness of our own human pilgrimage.

Rather, we are expected to submit it openly and trustingly [and we will eventually] discover that we pray a prayer along with our brothers and sisters in very different circumstances.¹⁴

Notes

1. Ray Fitzgerald, "Aretha Gets Respect," Spinningsoul.com, 2/14/11.
2. Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 18.
3. Peterson, 18.
4. Bruce Metzger and Roland Murphy, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 788.
5. Artur Weiser, *Psalms: The Old Testament Library* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1962), 777.
6. 2 Chronicles 26:16, downfall of King Uzziah, Proverbs 11:2.
7. Hill, Lippy, and Wilson, *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 729.
8. Ellen Blue, "Theological Perspective for Psalm Text for the Eighth Sunday after Epiphany," *Feasting on the Word, Year A*, edited by Barbara Brown Taylor and David Bartlett, 392.
9. I am indebted to *Feasting on the Word, Year A*, for these exegetical insights.
10. Hill, Lippy, and Wilson, 729.
11. Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona: Saint Mary's Press, 1986), 15.
12. Brueggemann, 16.
13. Ibid.
14. Brueggemann, 23-24.