

CALM
Psalm 131

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 18, 2018, as part of a Lenten sermon series on Leonard Bernstein's Chichester Psalms, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Passage

*O 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.
But 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.*

*O Israel, hope in the Lord
from this time on and for evermore.*

In an undergraduate course on Hemingway decades ago, I remember the professor pointing out that in some of Hemingway's scenes of war, love, beauty, hope, and death, the church is often present, but in the background.

The specific scene I remember from class is one in which Hemingway is depicting the experiences of Nick Adams in World War I.

Nick sat against the *wall* of the church where they had dragged him to be clear of machine-gun fire in the street. Both legs stuck out awkwardly. He had been hit in the spine. His face was sweaty and dirty. The sun shone on his face. The day was very hot...Two Austrian dead lay in the rubble in the shade of the house. Up the street were other dead. Things were getting forward in the town. It was going well. Stretcher bearers would be along any time now. ... Nick turned his head carefully away smiling sweatily....¹

Though Nick Adams is injured seriously, surrounded by ravages of war, and leaning against a church wall that can *support* him in his injury but is powerless to stop the killing around him, Nick seeks a measure of peace, limited though it be. The sun is shining "on his face." He looks "straight ahead brilliantly." "He turns his head carefully." He is able to "smile sweatily" at the hope of a stretcher on its way, the hope of survival.

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In the psalm before us today – the last of Bernstein's Chichester Psalms which have shaped our Lenten worship this year – the psalmist expresses a mood of *quiet trust*, of *calm*, of *peace* on its way, not unlike that to which Hemingway gave hopeful voice through the character of Nick Adams.

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up [the psalmist says],
my eyes are not raised too high;

¹ Ernest Hemingway, "Chapter VI," in *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway, The Finca Vigia Edition* (New York: Scribner, 1987). The scene is from *In Our Time*, originally published in 1925.

I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.
But 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.

Because this psalm is labeled “a psalm of ascents,” it likely is written for or out of a pilgrimage, a time in which faithful people of Israel journey to the Holy City of Jerusalem, ascending the hill on which its Temple rests, to lean against its walls like Nick Adams leans against the wall of a church in a war-torn city.

Just as Nick has been stripped of all accoutrements of life by the death and destruction around him, these pilgrims by been humbled by the losses they have known, by the things left behind by the force of circumstance.

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high...

Left behind are

- Material things they have known
- Worldly power and pleasure, knowledge and wisdom
- Success and accomplishment, they have “gone about *in* or *among*”²
- Knowledge or action reserved more for the sphere of God than for the sphere of human beings.

*I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.*

II.

After leaving behind such accoutrements of power and knowledge, the psalmist gives voice to goal of the pilgrimage.

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...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.

In the shadow of the Holy Temple, the psalmist, who is likely female or one writing in a feminine voice, finds calm in one of the most fundamental bonds of human life: the bond between mother and child.

Notice the psalmist initially describes this bond generically, almost clinically: “I have calmed and quieted my soul,” she writes, “like *a* weaned child with its mother.” She could be describing *any* child and *any* mother. “I have calmed and quieted *my* soul, like *any* weaned child with its mother.”

² This is a translation Robert Alter gives to the phrase “occupy myself with.” Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation With Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 457.

But in the next line, the psalmist moves this generic picture of *any* mother with *any* child one step deeper into the intimate and familial: “My soul is like *the* weaned child that is *with me*.” “My soul is like *this* child” that is at my breast.

This move on the part of the psalmist – from *generic* mother with *generic* child to *specific* mother with *specific* child draws us into this “psalm of calm” in a deeply personal way. The psalm beckons us to seek out those *most fundamental relationships* in our lives through which to seek the tender calm we desire. Throughout the psalms and at other places in the Old Testament, the scriptures hold up the calm and peace such fundamental relationships – when they are healthy – can bring.

For the sake of my *relatives and friends*
I will say, “Peace be within you.”³

How very good and pleasant it is
When *kindred* live together in unity.⁴

May your *friends* be like the sun as it rises in its might.⁵

...it is you, my *equal*,
My *companion*, my *familiar friend*,
With whom I kept pleasant company:
We walked in the house of God with the throng.⁶

At least half the human population – the half to which I happen to belong – will never know directly the experience of holding a child at the breast, feeding a child, weaning a child. But by focusing on these other primary relationships of family and friendship which most of us have, the psalmist calls us as much as possible to turn to those relationships to find the calm we seek.

- Parent and child
- Sibling
- Friend
- Spouse
- Partner
- Those with whom we walk and talk and keep sweet counsel.

“A friend is one before whom I may think aloud,” Emerson wrote.⁷

A friend is one *with whom* and *in whose presence* I have calmed and quieted my soul.

IV.

In addition to placing us in the realm of *our most intimate relationships*, the psalmist also places in the realm of nature as we seek calm.

³ Psalm 122:8.

⁴ Psalm 133:1.

⁵ Judges 5:31.

⁶ Psalm 55:13-14. Unfortunately this beautiful description of a friendship that has been betrayed.

⁷ See <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/34205.html>.

A child being weaned from its mother occurs apart from cultural trappings, racial differences, religious traditions, tribal politics. Just as the psalmist has moved from things too marvelous and great for her life, she moves us away from the trappings and perplexities of the world into the realm of nature.

*...like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.*

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Once he returned home from war to Michigan, Nick Adams sought calm in the lake he had known as a child. Though he knew a fire had ravaged the shoreline in his absence, he still returned to it in search of healing. Just as the psalmist joins pilgrims en route to Jerusalem, Nick makes a pilgrimage to the lakeside of his childhood.

Nick sat down against the charred stump...looking out over the country. He did not need to get his map out. He knew where he was from the position of the river.

... his legs stretched out in front of him [much as they had been stretched out when he leaned against the wall of the church, injured], he noticed a grasshopper walk along the ground and up onto his woolen sock....he watched the black grasshopper that was nibbling at the wool of his sock with its fourway lip... Carefully he reached his hand down and took hold of the hopper by the wings. He turned him up, all his legs walking in the air, and looked at the joined belly. ...

“Go on hopper,” Nick said, speaking out loud for the *first* time. “Fly away somewhere.”

He tossed the grasshopper up into the air and watched him sail away to a charcoal stump across the road.
...

Nick stood up...Underfoot the ground was good walking. Two hundred yards down the hillside the fire line stopped. Then it was sweet fern, growing ankle high...the country alive again.⁸

Like a mother finding calm from the weaning of her child, Nick Adams finds calm from the grasshopper nibbling at his sock. He finds “good walking,” “sweet fern,” the country “alive again” in the renewal of nature. “Go on hopper...Fly away somewhere.”

VI.

In the third of this three verse psalm, the psalmist does not reserve the calm she finds for herself alone. She shares it with the larger communities of which she is part: the people of God, her family, her nation.

O Israel [she says], hope in the Lord
from this time on and for evermore.

Though we be only one solitary citizen, one solitary resident of our community and nation, the peace we come to know, the calm we find, we never hold for ourselves alone, but we are compelled to share it with others, in our immediate circle, in our community, in our nation, and in our world.

O people of Israel,

⁸ Hemingway, “Big Two-Hearted River Part I,” 164-165.

O people of Westminster,
O people of the United States of America:
Hope in the Lord;
Hope in the Lord;
From this time on and for evermore.

We share this sense of calm with all who come our way.

Amen.