

Trinity Episcopal Church, Buchanan, Virginia
Sermon, February 27, 2011, Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany
Rev. Jonathan F. Harris

What an interesting Psalm we have for today. Go ahead and get it out and take a look at it if you would like. I am always glad for the opportunity to preach on the Psalms – that body of 150 prayer-poems that address just about every aspect of life. One nifty thing about today's Psalm – number 131 – is that it's short. Quite short. So short, maybe you could even memorize it. And if you were traveling to a holy city – say, Jerusalem – that was situated on top of a mountain, and you were headed up that mountain from whatever days travel away, to go to a pilgrimage festival in that city, and you had a bunch of stuff to carry like food or water or a sleeping child, and your hands weren't free to hold a book or a piece of paper, which might not matter anyways because most people then couldn't read – it might be handy, then, to have committed to memory a Psalm short enough to remember and sing on the journey. Along with the Psalms from 120 to 134, Psalm 131 is a "Song of Ascent," a song to sing on the ascent, on the way up to the holy city of Jerusalem.

Lectionary leaflet, BCP, NRSV Bible, chair

Now there is another interesting dimension to this Psalm 131, that surfaces in the different translations. Our translation here comes from our Book of Common Prayer, which was translated into English with an eye to what would flow well when read out loud, for, this book being our book that we pray with together, where the stuff in it is going to be stuff that we say out loud, pray out loud. So that is one reason why this translation of the Psalms – and they are all right here in the BCP, very handy – might be a little different from some of the other translations, because it is written in a way that flows well when uttered out of the mouth. Here in the New Revised Standard Version, called NRSV for short, which is the translation we use in reading our other lessons from Scripture from the lectern, has a different way of translating verse 3. Here in the leaflet the translation at verse 3 is "But I still my soul and make it quiet, like a child upon its mother's breast; my soul is quieted within me." But in the NRSV translation, it says "But I have calmed and quieted my soul," pretty much the same, but then it says "like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is *with* me." This translation makes quite clear that the psalmist here is a woman; a woman, perhaps, who is on her way to the mountain top to Jerusalem, and carrying her child, with her. The child finds comfort leaning on her mother's breast, as so, in verse 4, does Israel find comfort in

God: “O Israel, wait upon the Lord, from this time forth for evermore.” A deep powerful image of faith, comfort, to be sure.

As such “Psalm 131 commends the approach to life that the psalms regularly describe as “righteous” and “happy”— [descriptions of] utter trust in and childlike dependence upon God for life and future” (McCann). The child with his or her mother on the way to Jerusalem models the exhortation of Jesus in today’s Gospel passage, “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.” As one commentator puts it, continual worry and anxiety with a “Concern about what diseases, tragedies, pains, and privations tomorrow may bring can be totally debilitating. As a result, [if we always fret for tomorrow], the gift of today” will be lost, as will the gift of tomorrow, if we fret for it. That is why, as our Lord taught, we ask of God to “Give us this day our daily bread” (Tucker). “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ . . . But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”