

**Sermon Title:** "Calmed and Quieted"  
**Scriptures:** Psalm 131 and Matthew 23:1-12  
**Location:** Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church,  
**Date:** November 5, 2017 All Saints' Day  
**Preacher:** Rev. Grace Boyer

There is a bumper sticker that reads, "Dogs have owners....Cats have staff." My husband and I have two cats that we love. They were rescue kittens from the floods of 2004 that swept through the Swannanoa Valley. Perhaps because their early life was filled with flood waters and hunger, they have an intensity about feeding time that surpasses any cat I have ever had. As feeding time approaches, the cats become increasingly loud, vocal, competing for our attention, pacing the floor. It is so noisy you can't hear yourself think. But the moment they are fed, the house is quiet. The cats are relaxed. "I have calmed and quieted my soul..." writes the psalmist.

Those of you who have held a baby when they are hungry know the sound of their cries. Not having words to express their hunger, this pain in their stomach, they cry louder and louder. They are inconsolable until food arrives. But once they are fed, there is a peace and the sounds of cooing of contentment. "I have calmed and quieted my soul..." writes the psalmist.

In the same way, a young child who is overly tired, or past bedtime, but is fussing and fighting sleep with all their might.... When sleep does come, there is silence, except for the gentle breathing in and out. The struggle has stopped, and there is rest. "I have calmed and quieted my soul..." writes the psalmist.

Psalm 131 focuses on the image of a child in his/her mothers' arms: A child that is not crying out in hunger, or tiredness, not grasping or struggling, but is simply at rest. A weaned child: a child who is filled and needs nothing from the mother except her presence. The psalm lifts up this image of peaceful rest as one way to be in God's presence. "I have calmed and quieted my soul...."

But it doesn't say that that is the only way to be in God's presence. The psalms express a range of emotions before God.

-The previous Psalm 130 begins "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice."

-Psalm 13, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?"

-Psalm 22, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me."

-But also Psalm 122, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'"

-Psalm 103 "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless God's holy name."

Psalms of Joy and laughter. Psalms of desperation, grief, anger, hunger, trust, praise, peace..... it's all in there.

The Psalms were songs, the hymnbook of the Israelite community. They were sung in worship, or as people walked on their journeys. Psalm 131 is a specific type of song, a Song of Ascents. That means it was sung on the road, on the journey up to Jerusalem, climbing the ascent to the temple for religious festivals and high holy days. The pilgrimage to Jerusalem was a family affair with parents, children and sometimes whole clans or villages traveling together on the road for days or weeks on end.

Psalms 120-134 are all Songs of Ascents. Since these psalms were sung on the journey, they were short and memorizable, with a range of emotions, and struggles of faith. They spoke of family things, since there were men, women, and children all traveling together. Some scholars say that Psalm 131 may have been sung by women who were approaching the temple, with children in their arms (hence verse 2 “my soul is like the weaned child that is with me”). In the same way, Psalm 128 may have been sung by fathers, or Psalm 123 by servants. Different parts of the community, each singing out their own song on the journey.

This journey was one of the ways the Israelite community shared their faith with the next generation and nurtured their own spiritual lives. They embodied their faith by putting one foot in front of the other on this long journey to the temple, answering the children’s questions about where are we going and why are we going and are we there yet? Adults telling stories around the campfires about their experiences on past trips or people who are no longer with them; young parents learning from seasoned grandparents; and everyone storing up experiences to share with those in the village no longer able to physically make the journey. And these short Psalms, these songs of faith, were the way they taught each other theology and strengthened each other in spiritual practice.

Psalm 131 is short, but packed. It begins with words of humility, the heart and eyes are not raised too high. “I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.” In the Old Testament, “great and marvelous things” are what God does, “great and marvelous” is what God is. It’s a way of saying, I know that God is God and I am not. But I am in here in God’s presence and my heart and eyes are focused here and now.

Verse 2, “I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother.” Sometimes we are calmed and quieted because a need has been met, like hunger or recovery from an illness. Sometimes we are calmed and quieted because we are distracted by a joy, like a beautiful sunset that stops us in our tracks and puts things into perspective. Sometimes we are calmed and quieted because we are too tired to struggle any more, like a child who falls asleep from exhaustion. And sometimes on our journey of faith, it is an act of will to say, “I have calmed and quieted my soul.” It is an act of determined will and maturing faith to quiet our own hearts despite all that is going on around. An act of courage and trust to rest in God’s presence, despite the chaos around.

In the Gospel of John (14:27) Jesus speaks of peace he brings versus the peace of the world. The peace of the world comes with a cessation of war, or when the stomach is indeed full, or life is easy, when “all is as it should be”. But the peace of Christ comes even when the wars rage on, the stomach is gnawing, and life is complicated. “I have calmed and quieted my soul like a weaned child,” like a maturing child. I am not grasping, and craving, but am still. It’s not that the needs don’t exist, but the desperation has been put aside for a moment.

Then the Psalm ends, in verse 3 with the words “hope in the Lord.” A better translation might be “trust in” the Lord. This trust is not just for a current reality, but for a future one knowing that God is ultimately in control. “Hope (TRUST) in the Lord from this time on and forevermore,” writes the Psalmist because God is the God of our past, present and future. This short three verse Psalm, sung by generations on the journey to Jerusalem, shaping their faith.

When we come forward for communion today, we are a bit like the Israelites going on a pilgrimage journey to Jerusalem and the temple. We come down the aisle: men, women, children, families together. Some with light easy steps, others carefully placing one foot in front of the other. We sing our songs. We remember this day those who are no longer with us and those whose lives have shaped our faith.

We come bringing ourselves, all the realities that are our lives, the joys and the struggles, each with our own songs and stories. Sometimes we come hungry, hungry for food, hungry for justice, or spiritually hungry. Sometimes we come in joy and gratitude. Sometimes we come tired, in need of rest. And sometimes we come as an act of will, a courageous statement of trust and hope even when our faith is shaky or the world around seems to shake.

And our walk together is not just at this communion table, but every time we meet for worship, Sunday School, fellowship, outreach, small groups,... whether coloring, cooking, cleaning, hammering, playing, discussing. It’s all a journey of faith, if we come listening to one another, leaning on each other, learning from one another, not lording our wisdom over others (as Jesus warned against in Matthew 23), but walking humbly together as fellow learners, fellow students, asking the question of our stewardship season, “what does the Lord require of us?”

And perhaps one of the lessons of Psalm 131 (that may be the hardest to hear in this modern busy age) is that sometimes what we need most, and what “the Lord requires of us”, is to just rest in God. To have the humility to know we need to rest and be fed and nourished by God. And that in resting in God and leaning on each other, we will then have the strength and wisdom to seek justice, and we will then have the strength and wisdom to love kindness in the world, and do what the Lord requires of us. (Micah 6:8)

On this All Saints Day, we will come to the communion table. We hear at this table that God loves us. That’s what this meal is about. It is a gracious abundant pouring out of love. It is simple meal of bread and juice... the ordinary food of life, nourishment for the

journey, reminding us of our dependence upon God who does great and marvelous things. God providing for God's children. For we will always be children of God, no matter our age or level of maturity, from day 1 to 110 years old and beyond. We will always be God's children. God is the only one who can fill us to contentment.

Let us read it again responsively:

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 forevermore.**

Let us rest in God.