

**Sermon: Peace and Calm   Psalm 131   November 16, 2022**  
**Rideau Park United Church Ottawa, ON   Rev Steve Clifton**

The shortest verse in the Bible is John 11: 35 – two words: Jesus Wept

The shortest Psalm is #117:

Praise the LORD, all you nations;  
 extol him, all you peoples.

<sup>2</sup> For great is God's love toward us,  
 and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.

Psalm 119 is the longest Psalm in the Bible; it is the longest chapter in Scripture too; Psalm 119 contains 176 verses and if we were to read it all in a church service, we would need about 15 minutes to power through it.

Today we read the second shortest Psalm. Psalm 131 has but three verses. But it is rich in its imagery. It speaks to something important. It is quite contemporary in its concern.

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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>3</sup> O Israel, hope in the LORD  
 from this time on and forevermore.

"I have calmed and quieted my soul."

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In the church of my youth, in the time when elders came and visited at home several times a year, there was a legendary elder who, when he visited would ask: "How is it with your soul?" Some elders might talk about the weather, or about how the Blue Jays were doing, but this visitor would always create space for going deeper.

How is it with your soul? How goes it with your spirit? Like the Psalmist are you calm and quiet within?

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A friend recently mentioned an old Chinese curse: May you live in interesting times" We live in *interesting* times. Here are a few things people have mentioned to me in recent weeks, things that disrupt their peace.

- We are learning to live with Covid, following on a global pandemic that has, so far, claimed more than 47000 lives in Canada. We may be anxious, uncertain...

- We are living in a time of change, with familiar patterns giving way to new schedules, new possibilities, and new priorities. Churches, schools, governments, workplaces, families, all of us...are all finding a way forward in an uncertain time
- There is war raging in Ukraine. A nuclear armed state has invaded its neighbor with no cause other than domination and conquest.
- Because of war and pandemic, fuel prices are higher. Food prices are inflated.
- We live in an era of disinformation. Of conspiracy theories. Of alternative facts.
- We are increasingly polarized. Cruelty and anger infect the political conversation.
- The United Nations Climate Change Conference is meeting now in Egypt. Climate change and its manifestations are worrying, maybe especially for young people who have more years ahead on this planet than older people do...

With all of this swirling around us: Is it well with your soul...?

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The Psalmist writes

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

<sup>2</sup> But I have calmed and quieted my soul,  
like a weaned child with its mother;

Imagine attending to your soul, your spirit, your feelings, as a mother nurtures her baby.  
What do you do to calm and quiet your soul? How do you care for your spirit?

Wendell Berry writes:

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

As the poet says -the natural world can be a respite, a balm for the soul. The beauty of a forest, of a river flowing, of birds on a feeder, of shining stars and glowing moon can bring calm, lift us out of current circumstance. For a time, we can rest in the grace of the world and know the peace of the Creator. Maybe God's good creation can nurture our souls.

Maya Angelou`s poem “Alone” begins in this way:

Lying, thinking  
 Last night  
 How to find my soul a home  
 Where water is not thirsty  
 And bread loaf is not stone  
 I came up with one thing  
 And I don't believe I'm wrong  
 That nobody,  
 But nobody  
 Can make it out here alone.

Nobody can make it alone. Community nurtures the soul. Shared burdens are lighter to carry. Hopeful people can lift our spirits.

Recently my daughter Katherine and I decided that we would each read some seldom read but great books. It`s a shared challenge. We started with what is said to be the greatest American Novel Moby Dick. I was supposed to read it in university, but other things took priority...

Yes, there are two chapters on detailed whale anatomy. Three chapters on how whales are wrongly pictured in art. But the central character is such a hopeful person. Ishmael the sailor is able to look at the religions, cultures, aesthetics of his ship`s diverse crew and he can see the good in all of it and in all of them. In our political world which is encouraging fear of those who are different, this 19<sup>th</sup> century whaler is able to embrace the world and it all of its God- given diversity.

Hopeful people are good for the soul. Even those who inhabit books and movies can nurture our spirits.

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One more poem- from David Whyte:

This is not  
 the age of information.

This is *not*  
 the age of information.

Forget the news,  
 and the radio,  
 and the blurred screen.

This is the time  
of loaves  
and fishes.

People are hungry  
and one good word is bread  
for a thousand. — [David Whyte](#)

I had an elderly neighbor some years ago; she couldn't get out much. She spent much of her day watching the news on TV and she became convinced that the world was coming to an end. War and strife and unrest and crime were her daily spiritual intake. To nurture our souls, we might attend to what we take in... too much negative media or social media – too much despair and negativity - might darken our view of the world. Seeing generosity, living kindness, speaking hope, seeking signs of the goodness and grace of others and of the world, can be a balm to the soul.

As a faith community we hope to create space for soul care... As a church we create opportunities for community so that we are not alone.

Spiritual care is found in Sunday worship, Forest Church., Healing Pathway, online Meditation... In advent there will a labyrinth evening, and the spiritual practices of Encarna, and a Blue Christmas service to bring healing to our hurting spirits.

Advent is just weeks way and there is opportunity there for generosity, through the Christmas Cheer program which helps 175 local households; the Shoe box outreach aiming for 120 gift boxes for the children and women of Minwaashin Lodge and the children and youth that come to Banff community house.

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I do not occupy myself with things  
too great and too marvelous for me.  
<sup>2</sup> But I have calmed and quieted my soul,  
like a weaned child with its mother;  
<sup>3</sup> O people of God, hope in the LORD  
from this time on and forevermore.

How is it with your soul? Might we pay attention to and nurture our spirits as a mother attends to her baby. May we know the nurturing love of God that surrounds us all in every moment.  
**Amen**