

DEAR LORD
BE GOOD TO ME
THE SEA IS SO
WIDE AND
MY BROTHER
SO SMALL



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Leave No Child Behind®



Instructions to Create the Seven Day Guide for Reflection and Prayer Booklet. Each of these pages for the Seven Day Guide for Reflection and Prayer is formatted horizontally to include two panels per 8 ½" x 11" page. Print pages 2-5 from the pdf file two-sided (Short-Edge Binding) to a standard printer. The four pdf pages will now appear as two two-sided pages. Stack them so the top right reads at the top 30th Anniversary Year, and fold down the middle to create one 5 ½" x 8 ½" booklet. Distribute copies of the booklet to adult (and if desired older youth) members of your place of worship the weekend before your celebration of the National Observance of Children's Sabbaths to help them prepare their hearts and minds as we ask "Where Does It Hurt?" and listen to heal our children.

Sunday: Be Strong and Let Your Heart Take Courage

*All you who wait for the Lord,
be strong and let your heart take courage. (Ps. 31:24)*

Today is the Children's Sabbath! We journeyed through this week, preparing our hearts and minds through reflection and prayer guided by the psalmist's words echoing those of children and youths today: Listen closely to me! Get me out of this net. You saw my suffering. Have mercy on me because I am depressed. Don't let me be put to shame because I have cried out to you. But you heard...

Listening to where it hurts is hard. Sharing where it hurts is scary. To both those who listen and those who share, the psalmist offers these words: be strong and let your heart take courage.

We are strong and courageous enough to listen to where it hurts: to face the pain of pandemic and poverty, racism and our national reckoning with white supremacy, and the depression, distress, and despair that our children experience. We are strong and courageous enough to share where it hurts—with those we trust who are prepared to listen as the first step toward working together to heal the pain and prevent more harm.

We are strong and courageous because we don't listen and share alone; we do it with God's loving and steadfast presence, with our community of faith's commitment, and joined by countless places of worship across the nation who are uniting through the National Observance of Children's Sabbaths in shared determination to put our faith into action with and for children throughout the year to come.

Prayer: O God, help me be strong and let my heart take courage. Let me be one who strengthens and encourages children and youths in all I do. Amen.

ⁱSusan Dominus, "I Feel Like I'm Drowning," The New York Times Magazine, May 16, 2021, 32.

ⁱⁱIbid., 49-50.

ⁱⁱⁱIbid., 28.

^{iv}Ibid., 47.

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30th Anniversary Year National Observance of Children's Sabbaths

"WHERE DOES IT HURT?": LISTENING TO HEAL OUR CHILDREN

Seven Day Guide for Reflection and Prayer

Based on Psalm 31

By Shannon Daley-Harris

As we begin this week leading up to the 30th anniversary of the National Observance of Children's Sabbaths weekend, we may prepare our hearts and minds by reflecting on Psalm 31. While the psalm is attributed to David, we don't know for certain who wrote this psalm; it gives us the opportunity to hear it as the voice of a young person. Enter this week prepared to listen—to listen to the voices and experiences of children and youths around you, to listen to the voice of the psalmist, to listen to yourself.

The verses of Psalm 31 in the pages that follow are from the Common English Bible translation. You are encouraged to read the psalm in its entirety and in your preferred translation as well, for the additional insights and reflections that provides.



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Monday: Listen Closely to Me!

Listen closely to me!

Deliver me quickly;

be a rock that protects me;

be a strong fortress that saves me! (Ps. 31:2)

As a child, I remember trying to get my father's attention. Sometimes I would tug on the leg of his pants, other times I would call out. He was usually responsive, sensitive, crouching down to hear what I had to say when he knew it was serious.

Occasionally, if he was engaged in a conversation or busy doing something, he would hold up his index finger—it meant wait, I can't pay attention right now, something else has my priority. Waiting for him to listen to me then felt like an eternity.

What do you remember of trying to be heard by your parent or the person who raised you? Did you feel heard, heeded? Ignored, rebuked? Was your voice drowned out by other voices, crises, circumstances? Who listened, really listened, to you when you were a child, a youth, a young person just reaching adulthood?

The psalmist is calling out to God, trusting God is there but not mincing words. These are the urgent demands of one who desperately wants to be heard now, who needs to be helped right away, who is asking for strong protection and shelter. Was that ever you? What young person might that be today? Perhaps one like high schooler Sarah who confided, "If I was being honest, I need a lot of help, because I feel like I'm just drowning in a pool. [I see others trying to help] but their hands are slipping, and I'm pulling myself down and you cannot swim. You cannot swim up."ⁱ

How can we hear and heed the call of children and youths?

Prayer: O God, my rock and fortress, help me trust that you listen and deliver. Help me to be a strong and safe place for children and youths who need me, to listen when they call, to work for a world in which all children and youths are heard and protected. Amen.

Saturday: But You Heard

When I was panicked, I said,

"I'm cut off from your eyes!"

But you heard my request for mercy

when I cried out to you for help. (Ps.31:22)

But you heard....

Some cries for help from our children and youths are clear—expressed in words, naming the need, inviting our response.

Other cries for help are harder to hear—the pale scars from self-harm lining a daughter's forearm, the diminishing body from a teen's eating disorder, the growing silence and distance of a formerly talkative son, the hours in bed of a child who can't bear to face another day, the plummeting grades or escalating anger, the withdrawal from family and friends, or the what-do-I-have-to-lose risky behavior. Panicked, feeling cut off, invisible in their distress. This has been a difficult year for so many of our children and youths, for some adding to already intolerable long-time burdens.

"This is just how it is," said a teen named Catherine—"usually I don't show emotion until something triggers me, then I'm a complete mess. It's like—conceal, conceal, conceal, then a mental breakdown, then back to being fine again."^{iv}

We can't fix it all, and we can't repair it right away. But we can start by hearing, by listening to the spoken and unspoken hurt of our children and youths. We can be still when we want to run away from the reality of their pain. We can be calm when their hurt makes us feel panic. We can be attentive and see what they cannot bear to say. We can accept their truth that we would rather reject.

To do that, we will have to stay close to God as well as to them. We will need the comfort and assurance that God hears and holds their pain even as we, God's people, seek to do the same. We don't have to have all the answers for our children, but we do have to take the first loving step of listening.

Prayer: God, help me hear children's cries for help and respond in love. Amen.

Friday: Don't Let Me Be Put to Shame

*But me? I trust you, Lord! I affirm, "You are my God."
My future is in your hands.*

*Don't hand me over to my enemies, to all who are out to get me!
Shine your face on your servant; save me by your faithful love!
Lord, don't let me be put to shame because I have cried out to you. (Ps. 31:14-17)*

Listening is an act of love. And sharing hurt and painful truths is an act of trust. "Don't let me be put to shame because I have cried out to you," pleads the psalmist, plead our children.

A child advocacy leader who survived abuse as a child wrote, "Ever wonder why it often takes years for persons who have experienced sexual violence or harassment to speak the truth—even to those who profess to love them?...The monster in my life had a laugh so contagious that people laughed with him even when they felt like crying. It didn't matter that his presence meant silent tears for me—who would believe me? He told me they wouldn't and they didn't."

She expressed a hope that others who have been so hurt will be surrounded by family and friends "who will be gentle with their words and careful with their assumptions about the human capacity for harm doing; and that they will be mindful of the hidden wounds carried by those who carry stuff 'well' because they have had to for so long."

Whatever kind of hurt and harm our children carry—and whatever we ourselves hold—let us be gentle with our words, careful with our assumptions, and mindful of the hidden wounds our children and others bear. Let our children and youths not feel put to shame because they cry out to us.

Prayer: O God, help me be gentle and trustworthy with those who share their hurt and pain with me. Amen.

Tuesday: Get Me Out of This Net

*Get me out of this net that's been set for me
because you are my protective fortress. (Ps. 31:4)*

The Children's Sabbath invites us to identify the nets tripping and trapping our children.

- The net of hunger, homelessness, poverty, and the widening income gap. We can take steps as individuals, places of worship, communities, and as a nation to ensure that children, youths, and families have enough to eat, a safe and secure place to call home, and a living wage, with adequate benefits like the Child Tax Credit so all can make ends meet.
- The net of illness, injury, and other health and mental health needs without adequate health coverage or care. What will we do individually and collectively to assure coverage to the more than 4 million children without health insurance, and to make sure children and youths get the health and mental health care they need?
- The net of racism and the systems and structures built on it that trap children and youths of color with discrimination, criminalization, over-policing, incarceration, unequal education, and other traumas and harm. How will we act to get them out of that net, destroy it, and become, as congregations, communities, and a nation, the protective fortress they need and deserve?

The Children's Sabbath challenges us to embody our faith, reminding us that it is not the intention of God, source of love and justice, that our children suffer. We celebrate the Children's Sabbath because we recognize that as God's people we can serve as the protective fortress our children need and deserve, putting our faith into action to untangle the nets of injustice that ensnare them and to create communities where all children and youths flourish.

Prayer: God, my fortress, help me to get our children out of the nets that trap them, to tear the nets apart, and become for children and youths a fortress of protection. Amen.

Wednesday: You Saw My Suffering

*I rejoice and celebrate in your faithful love
because you saw my suffering—
you were intimately acquainted with my deep distress. (Ps. 31:7)*

Perhaps the only thing more painful than pain itself is when that suffering is ignored, unseen, when we are left to bear it alone and unsupported. Was there a time when you were hurting—as a child, teen, or in adulthood—and you felt unseen, that your suffering was ignored or unrecognized by others? Do you recall an experience when your hurting was seen, when someone saw and showed you care and concern?

There are many reasons why the suffering of children and youths may go unseen. It may be interior anguish that can't be seen the way a childhood scrape was. There may be distrust or reluctance to share a deeply personal pain. We may have overlooked or ignored their expressions of pain before. They may share with peers but fear adults will judge or misunderstand. We may be immersed in our own struggles which we can't see beyond, or young people may feel they don't want to burden us.

It is hard but crucial to see and hear. A high school orchestra director shared, after a year of the COVID pandemic, "I want to talk to you about our students. I talk to them. And they tell me the same thing. They're struggling. They're sad. They're overwhelmed. They're hurting. They're not learning. And they've almost given up or they've already given up....I've had four different students reach out to me with thoughts of suicide and two reach out to me for help with sexual assaults that happened during the pandemic."ⁱⁱ

Let today be the day we become more intentional about seeing the suffering of the children and youths in our lives, communities, nation. We can start by beginning conversations with children in our lives: what am I missing and overlooking? Are there hard things you are going through that I don't know about? Would you be willing to share with me?—because I really care about you, and want to know about the hard stuff, not just the happy. For those of us without children at home, we can still look outward with open eyes and hearts to see the suffering and distress of young people in our community and nation as the first step in being able to help.

Prayer: Dear God, let me show faithful love by seeing the suffering of children and youths. Amen.

Thursday: Have Mercy

*Have mercy on me, Lord,
because I'm depressed.
My vision fails because
of my grief,
as do my spirit and
my body.*

*My life is consumed with
sadness;
my years are consumed with
groaning.*

*Strength fails me because
of my suffering;
my bones dry up.*

*I'm a joke to all my enemies,
still worse to my neighbors.
I scare my friends,
and whoever sees me in the
street runs away!*

*I am forgotten, like I'm dead,
completely out of mind;
I am like a piece of pottery,
destroyed.*

*Yes, I've heard all the gossiping,
terror all around;
so many gang up together
against me,
they plan to take my life!
(Ps. 31:9-13)*

Today, let us just sit with the painfully honest words describing the experience of the psalmist. Let us hear in them the experience of many of our children and youths today. Perhaps in these words you hear something of your own pain as well.

*The pain of countless precious lives lost—Trayvon, Tamir, Mike, Eric, Breonna, Elijah, and on and on and on—and others discounted and diminished, disrespected and oppressed as a result of our nation's deeply rooted racism and white supremacy at individual, systemic, and structural levels. A teen named Charles said, "To keep proving these stereotypes wrong, it takes a lot out of me."ⁱⁱⁱ *The fearful shadow of COVID* that has taken lives young and old, left still unknown impacts on long-term health, disrupted learning, and destroyed livelihoods. *The excruciating experience of unmet mental health needs*—seeking to endure unseen, unspoken, unrecognized pain that makes getting out of bed, learning, just living a struggle.*

Let us sit with what we saw yesterday of the suffering of children and youths. We sit with the words, see the suffering, not to drown ourselves in pain, but because truly listening and seeing is the first and necessary step before we can help heal the hurts, tend to the pain, and try to prevent further harm. As James Baldwin wrote, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

Prayer: O God, I am listening as the first step in healing. Help me sit with the words and pain of your beloved children. Amen.