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Sermon 7 June 2020

Psalm Beach 1: Psalm 16 (Getting Oriented)

- Intro
 - It is an absolutely perfect day here at Psalm Beach—the weather is ideal, not too hot and not too cold—the breeze is calm, the tide is gentle and predictable—it looks like everybody’s got a good spot—got their beach chair or their umbrella or their blanket in place—got their territory--marked out the boundaries of their **portion** of the beach—looks like everyone is fortunate today—
 - —I see the lifeguard is at his station, keeping watch—you know, a good lifeguard doesn’t just rescue people when they get in trouble, when danger appears—they also keep watch before danger comes
 - Isn’t a day at the beach just what we all need sometime? When life gets stressful, when we’re tired or depressed, or going through hard times, a day at the beach just helps to get us revived and rejuvenated—you know, there’s a reason that the Sabbath has its own commandment—a reason that we’re commanded to rest—there’s a reason that even Jesus too a break from the crowd every now and then to recharge—we must sometimes find a place of re-orientation, so that we can again participate in the often harsh realities of life and work to transform them

- I've been thinking this week that some of my favourite music, some of my favourite songs, are about the way an encounter with the seashore can change our attitude—the way the waves can wash our cares away--there's something about witnessing something so ancient, so much bigger than we are, something so predictable and constant, that helps put our lives into perspective—I think of songs like Otis Redding's "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay"—as he sings-- I got nothin to live for, looks like nothin's gonna come my way, so I'm just gon sit at the dock of the bay, watching the tide roll away—I left my home in Georgia—oh I know what that's like—I think too of Blake Shelton's song that he sings about the way when things are frustrating and disappointing and infuriating, his mind drifts off to "some beach, somewhere,"—scores of tunes by Jimmy Buffett--there are so many songs about the way that a day at the beach melts your worries away, you can probably think of several—the way that it provides a respite and a comforting, therapeutic break—not a permanent escape from the world, that doesn't work, because the world and its troubles will find you in time--but a place to rest so that you can return refreshed to the work that needs to be done.
- It occurs to me that the Psalms are like that –we return to them again and again, for comfort, for healing, for nourishment, and we come away transformed, renewed—

- Today, the Sunday after Pentecost Sunday, is Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday in a long period of what the church calendar calls “ordinary time,” that runs from now until the beginning of Advent. On Trinity Sunday, the church celebrates the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which holds that there is One God, in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—as we heard Pastor Tasha sing about a while ago—God in three persons, blessed Trinity. Thinking about the Trinity can very quickly get confusing—and there have been a lot of bad analogies that have been used to try and explain the Trinity, even heresies, but basically Trinity Sunday is a day to remember that as Christians, when we talk about or think about God, we need to consider all three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—because they are all God, and they are all distinct—and if you leave one, or two, of them out of the way you think or talk about God, then you’re not getting the whole picture, you’re not telling the whole story—we need all three. We need all three. That’s Trinitarian thinking.
- Now, because this is the first Sunday in our Psalm Beach series, it’s probably a good idea to provide a little background. For six Sundays, we’re going to be looking at the Book of Psalms on this virtual holiday we’re taking to Psalm Beach. And when you go on a beach holiday it’s a good idea to take a phrase book or a travel dictionary so you can understand the local language, and so each Sunday we’re going to have in our sermon notes a Psalm Beach phrase book” section where you can find definitions of words and phrases that might

need to be translated. And one of the words you might have heard in the brief message about this sermon series—in that promo, that advertisement (and didn't Pastor Tasha's Dad, Mark do a good job on that voice-over?)—one of the words you heard there is ketuvim. Now the ketuvim is what the Book of Psalms is part of—it's a section of the Hebrew Bible that we call the "writings," and it's the third section, after the Torah, and the Prophets. The ketuvim contains 11 books, and 3 of them are called the poetic books—Psalms, Proverbs and Job. So the Psalms are poetry, **they're poetic prayers--** some are very much like poems, or songs, while others feel more like prayers, and some if not most or even all would have been used at some point in Hebrew worship in the temple. So the book of psalms is a collection of this poetry, and it's divided into 5 collections, and they're grouped together and discussed in certain categories, like what they're about or the way they're written-- but here's an interesting thing (and here's another couple of words in your phrase book) —the Hebrew word for PSALM, lyrics that are sung with musical accompaniment is MIZMOR, and some of the poetry in the Book of Psalms is called MIZMOR, but not all of it. The Hebrew word for the entire collection, what we call the Book of Psalms is TEHILLIM—or praises—and that gives you an indication of the overall theme of all the psalms—it's praise—so what is the Book of Psalms about in general? It's about PRAISE. And if you look at the five Psalms that come in a row at the very end of the Book of Psalms, you'll see that that is the "final

word” that we are left with, as they all begin with the phrase “Praise the Lord.”

- Now, as we go along in the series, we’ll talk about what kind of work, what kind of text, each psalm we look at is, and there are 3 general categories that each of them might fall into—three buckets, three very general types of psalms and they are these: there are hymns—those are worship songs, and then secondly there are petitions—psalms that ask God for something—Laments fall into this category,--and petitions can be individual or communal—from one person or from a group of people-- and then thirdly there are psalms of thanksgiving. Most psalms are either petitions or thanksgiving—and if you just open up the book of Psalms at random, you’ll find that this is true—most Psalms are either asking God for something or thanking him for providing what was asked for.
- The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman has a very helpful way of looking at the Psalms, and it’s sort of like the way that we looked at the book of Philippians through the three themes of Pride, Progress and Partnership, except that his three themes are Orientation/disorientation and re-orientation. You may remember that Pastor Tasha mentioned these when she spoke on the 23rd Psalm back in March.

- And in a nutshell, Brueggemann says that there are Psalms of orientation, disorientation and re-orientation—First, Psalms of orientation talk about the way that the world and life ought to be, the IDEAL--the way the created cosmos is reliable, and equitable, and abundant and generous and predictable—life is a day at the beach—life is not unlike the tides on the shore with their regularity and abundant resources—seasons come and seasons go, things make sense—and the psalms that praise the way creation works, in shalom, in harmony and peace and wisdom, and psalms about the Torah, about the law, and about scheduled, predictable life-events like birth and marriage and death and seedtime and harvest—all of these are reflected in psalms of orientation—Got my toes in the water, life is good today—God’s in his heaven and all is right with the world. That’s orientation.
- But not all of the psalms are like that. Because life is not like that. Orientation is IDEAL, but life is not always ideal. You can’t live on a permanent vacation, on a never-ending beach holiday. Stuff happens. Sin happens. Suffering happens. Oppression happens. Injustice happens. Racism happens. Pandemics happen. Death happens. War happens. And so just as there are Psalms of orientation, there are psalms of disorientation. Psalms that cry out to God for deliverance, for answers. Psalms

that ask “what is the meaning of this?” Psalms that ask God how long he will wait before bringing salvation. Psalms that wonder if God has fallen asleep or forgotten his promises. Psalms that don’t offer trite answers like Job’s friends did in the face of his suffering, but Psalms that, like Job, lament loudly and descriptively. But even in the midst of lament, there is praise, because you don’t cry out to a God who is powerless, you cry out for salvation to a God who can save you.

- So then, thirdly, there are Psalms of re-orientation. Psalms that tell the story, with thanksgiving, of the way that God took a situation that seemed hopeless and transformed it, the way that God brought justice from injustice, liberation from oppression, new life from death.
- Orientation, disorientation, re-orientation. The Tehillim, the Book of Psalms, has what we might be forgiven for calling a trinitarian structure, because life, particularly the life of the people of God, has such a trinitarian structure. And so it is not surprising that Brueggemann suggests that for the Christian, this movement of orientation/disorientation and reorientation is most clearly played out in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, particularly as it is described in the kenosis hymn in Phillipians 2: Though he was in the form of God (orientation); He emptied himself, even to death on a cross (disorientation)

and therefore God has highly exalted him and given him a name above all names (reorientation)

- And so when we look at the Psalms we do so with the awareness of the movement that takes place from orientation to disorientation to reorientation, and we don't consider them in isolation, but always in relation to the other two—like the Trinity, we need to be aware of all three parts
- Let's look at today's scripture, Psalm 16.
 - Now the first thing you may notice about this psalm, right there at the front, is that This psalm is called a “miktam of David”—now let's start with the easy part of that phrase, “of David”—now that might mean that David wrote it—it's entirely possible that David could have written some or even many or all of the Psalms ascribed to him, or it could be that “of David” means that this psalm is to be associated with David, that it is Davidic—but the more difficult part of that phrase is the word that describes what this psalm IS—it is a miktam. Now here's another word from your Psalm Beach phrasebook—miktam. If you look that word up in Strong's Hebrew concordance, you will find that there are 6 miktams in the book of Psalms, and they are all described as a “miktam of David”—they are Psalms 16, 56, 57, 58, 59 and 60. All miktams. And the word miktam is defined in Strong's Hebrew concordance, so we don't have to wonder what it means, we can look it up and find out exactly what a miktam is. “Miktam” in

Strong's Hebrew Concordance is defined as "a technical term in psalm titles." That clears it right up, doesn't it? A miktam is something that some psalms are called. Well we already knew that, didn't we?

- But Strong's gives us that definition because the truth is, we don't know what a miktam is. That great Hebrew translator Robert Alter tells us that the writers of the Septuagint (that's the Greek Old Testament that was put together around the 3rd century) they thought that a miktam was an engraving, an inscription in stone. So a miktam might be something that **is set in stone**—or it might not, we don't know—and if that ambiguity bothers you a little bit, you are not alone.

Uncertainty can be uncomfortable, and in general, people don't much care for it. We LIKE for things to be set in stone—unchanging. But nevertheless, this psalm is a miktam.

- Now we also know that this is a prayer—just look at the first line—it is a petition to God. Protect me O God for in you I take refuge. Now the root of that word for protect is shamar (there's another word in our Psalm Beach phrasebook): Now shamar is the same word that is used in Genesis when God puts Adam and Eve in the garden to till the ground and KEEP it—that word for keep is shamar—Pastor Tasha mentioned this in her sermon on stewardship of the environment—it means to take care of, to guard, to protect—shamar is also the word

that Cain uses when he asks and “am I my Brother’s KEEPER”—so shamar is to watch out for, to preserve—

- Shamar is NOT to SAVE from a threat that is happening, to rescue from trouble—shamar is what happens BEFORE trouble comes.—like a lifeguard when he or she is in the lifeguard station—not actively rescuing, but watching out, protecting
- And so this is a prayer for protection—and then the Psalmist goes on to describe his situation—
- We read in verse 2, I say to the Lord, You are my Lord, I have no good apart from you—this sounds a lot like Paul in chapter 3 of Philippians, doesn’t it—all these things, all these works I could be proud of, are nothing—I have no good apart from the Lord.
- The psalmist then compares the holy ones in the land, in whom he delights, with those who worship other gods, who multiply their sorrows, whose sacrifices he will not participate in and whose names he won’t speak.
- The Lord, the psalmist says, is my portion and my cup—my PORTION—we hear that language used in many other places in the Bible—Psalm 14 and 73, and Lamentations 3—the psalmist is here using a metaphor that reflects the way land was distributed through inheritance, and in all of the Hebrew tribes got an inheritance of land—a PORTION—EXCEPT for the tribe of LEVI, who weren’t allowed to be landowners—but for them, God was their portion, their

inheritance, and so the Psalmist is echoing that situation and he is saying that God is his inheritance, it is God who sustains and provides for him—it's the equivalent of saying God is all I really need

- He goes on--The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places—I've got a good spot on the beach, I was fortunate enough to gain a good place in life—and on top of that, I have a goodly heritage—I can't complain about where I come from or where I have ended up—I'm from a good home and family
- And he goes on, describing the intimacy of his relationship with the Lord, and the way that God provides counsel and direction—God is before him and at his right hand
- Therefore—because of all this, my heart is glad, my soul rejoices and my body also rests secure—the psalmist is painting a picture of a life at peace and at rest in the Lord
- But he goes even further than this life, saying that God will not give me up to Sheol or let his faithful one see the pit—the Psalmist proclaims that not even death can touch him, but that God will show him the path of life, and in God's presence there is fullness of joy and at his right hand are pleasures forevermore.
- Now there are a couple of ways of reading and interpreting this Psalm
- On the one hand, we can certainly say that this is a Psalm of orientation—life is good in this Psalm, the way things are is desirable, and the Psalmist is asking God —to shamar—to keep--them that way.

On the one hand, this Psalm can be seen as a prayer to protect the status quo. There is no indication that this is “a cry for help from an immediate danger”—that’s not what the word shamar means. The psalmist says he takes refuge, but there is no mention of any danger that he needs to take refuge from. So this Psalm might remind us of the activities of some churches in affluent areas—particularly in the Western world-- whose worship is made up exclusively of “God is awesome” songs, and there’s never a lament or a prophetic critique to be heard—because they think that things are good, and they want them to stay that way.

- So you could read this Psalm as a prayer to preserve the status quo—but life, and God, have a way of disrupting the status quo to bring about transformation—to bring about new life—life more abundant—
- So maybe there are two ways to read this Psalm—firstly, as a prayer of protection for the status quo when things are going well— but that is not everyone’s experience—life is not always like that
- What if the way this Psalm describes reality doesn’t reflect the reality we live in? What if this isn’t the status quo—what if things are full of strife? What if there is division? Unrest, injustice? What if one’s reality doesn’t look like the peaceable kingdom that the psalmist describes? What if this Psalm of orientation doesn’t match our experience in the world? What if we live in a time of disorientation?

- Well I would suggest Then that praying this psalm can be a form of protest against the way things are, a plea for the way things could be, a prophetic judgment upon strife and division and suffering and injustice, an anticipation of the way things will be—a way of bringing about re-orientation—like a respite, a time of rest—a day at the beach
- And right here I just want to mention that so far we've talked about a couple of specific interpreters of the Psalms—we've mentioned Robert Alter, and Walter Brueggemann, but I want to mention a THIRD interpreter of this Psalm specifically
- Last Sunday we talked about Pentecost, and the way that Peter stood up and preached to the gathered Jews from all countries in Jerusalem—and in his sermon he refers to this Psalm
- And Peter refers to verse 10 specifically—For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit—in Luke, Peter says ‘He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.’
- And Peter says something quite remarkable about this verse and the verses around it.
- He basically says to the crowd at Jerusalem, “you and I both know that the Psalmist, David, died and was buried—his tomb is with us to this day”—but David was a prophet and God had promised to put one of his descendants on the throne, so David isn't talking about himself here, he's talking about Jesus, who was crucified and resurrected.

- And so Peter tells us that this Psalm, Psalm 16, is not simply a Psalm of orientation, a prayer to preserve the status quo—a Psalm that says things are good and asks the Lord to keep them that way, to protect them,
- No, Peter says that within the very words of this prayer for God's protection there is a prediction of what is to come, a vision of the one who will fulfill the Law, a prophecy of the one who comes to bring salvation and transformation and in whom all things are made new, the one who said of himself, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
 and recovering of sight to the blind,
 to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

- Peter is saying that Psalm 16 points to Jesus. The one whose presence transforms a broken world, the one who brings re-orientation to disorientation, the one who is with us in our sufferings, the one because of whom Paul tells the church at Philippi that even though he is in prison, even if he is put to death, in His presence there is fullness of joy, in His right hand are pleasures forevermore, the one because of whom Paul can say I have learned the secret of living in plenty or in need

- The Board of General Superintendents of the Church of the Nazarene has called for today to be a day of Prayer and Fasting for the church, in their words, “because of our deep sorrow for the way things are, and our profound hope in God’s faithfulness to bring about a more just and loving world” –and so I would encourage you to spend time today in prayer and fasting, petitioning God to protect and bring healing and to renew and revive each of us to work to build the Kingdom, to show God’s peace and to live out the good news of the Gospel
- You know, when our world is filled with strife and division, when our situation looks discouraging, when the dark clouds arise, when the shadows come, that’s when we can pray the words of Psalm 16 and proclaim that Jesus is my portion, my constant friend is He, his eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me—he does what? He watches me—shamar—he watches, guards, protects—and realising that changes things, evokes a new reality on earth as it is in heaven
- God bless you and keep you this week, may the Lord watch over you and protect you and bring us back together again. Amen.