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Sermon 21 June 2020: Psalm Beach 3 (Up to My Neck)

- Have you ever heard:
- We're drowning in regulations
- We've been flooded with paperwork
- I'm up to my neck in things to do
- I've had it up to here with this lockdown
- We're just trying to tread water
- It just feels like the bottom has dropped out
- It's sink or swim
- I just feel like I can't catch my breath
- I'm just trying to keep my head above water
- I am sure that you have heard, or more likely said, things like this yourself,  
and so when the Psalmist writes in Psalm 69
- Save me, O God,  
for the waters have come up to my neck.  
<sup>2</sup>I sink in deep mire,  
where there is no foothold;  
I have come into deep waters,  
and the flood sweeps over me.  
<sup>3</sup>I am weary with my crying;  
my throat is parched.  
My eyes grow dim  
with waiting for my God.
- We really don't need an explanation for what is being expressed there.

Whether the Psalmist is talking about a literal or a metaphorical flood here,

we can identify with the fear of drowning, with the feeling that we will be swallowed up, unable to breathe.

- You know sometimes we read scripture, especially passages from the Old Testament, and they can seem foreign to us—the language they use or the situations they describe may need some explanation so that we can better understand what is being said, or the story that is being told or the point that's being made.
- But Psalm 69 is not one of those passages—from the first words we read, we can feel the desperation, the anxiety, the fear that the Psalmist is expressing
- And so we know right from the beginning that this is a Psalm of disorientation—this Psalm is a supplication, a plea to God for rescue from a situation that is not only not ideal, not only uncomfortable, but it is urgent—if the waters—the Hebrew word is MAYIM, it's in your Psalm Beach PhraseBook—if the waters are up to your neck, if you have sunk in deep mire and you have no foothold, if you are in deep water and the flood is sweeping over you, then your situation is an emergency—time is of the essence—every minute counts
- The image here in Psalm 69 is an image of a person who is very close to being unable to breathe—and among the things that we cannot live without, breathing is at the top of the list
- Most people can survive for a few weeks without food, they can survive for a few days without water, but without the ability to breathe a person has only minutes before they perish—and the Psalmist lets us know that time has

passed by, saying, I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God.

- The prospect of being unable to breathe is a terrifying one—that’s part of the reason that the killing of George Floyd in the US is so disturbing, that’s the reason that “I can’t breathe” has become such a powerful phrase among protestors, that’s the reason that COVID-19 is so scary, because we hear about people who are unable to breathe on their own, who have to be intubated and placed on a ventilator—the prospect of drowning, of being suffocated, of being starved for oxygen, of being unable to take a breath resonates with each at every one of us at the most basic level of our being.
- We do not want to drown. And neither does the Psalmist. And so it is not surprising that this imagery appears more than once in the Tehillim, in the Psalter’s prayers of disorientation, these supplications and laments, not just in Psalm 69, but Psalm 130 begins with the familiar exclamation, “Out of the DEPTHS, I cry to you” --in Psalm 42 the Psalmist calls out, “all your waves and your billows have passed over me” and Psalm 88 cries, “Your dread assaults ... enclose me like a flood.”
- When I hear these images I can’t help but think back to the most memorable recent hurricane that hit Charleston, SC in September of 1989. Hurricane Hugo. To this day people in Charleston use Hugo to describe when certain things in their lives happened—either before Hugo or after Hugo. Hurricane Hugo was a category 4 Hurricane when it hit Charleston, with sustained winds of 140mph and a storm surge of around 12 to 20 feet high that moved

houses along the beach off their foundations and planted them hundreds of feet away. Boats were washed a half a mile inland. Dozens of people died and the storm cost the State of SC about 6 billion dollars in property damage alone. I remember months later, driving around Folly Beach when the public was allowed back in the area and the devastation was unimaginable—it was like a nuclear bomb had flattened everything, just razed it down. I remember too, in downtown Charleston, where 95% of the urban trees were lost, seeing the marks left by the water—you could tell from the line left on the outside walls of buildings how high the water had gotten—about 10 feet or so above the level of the street.

- I think of that and I am reminded that wind and water are powerful forces, and so the Psalmist's words speak of a powerful flood, too. And that's the reason we started this sermon with that weather report from Sam O David about Storm Shoshanim. Shoshanim is the Hebrew word for "lilies" (you'll find it in your Psalm Beach phrasebook) and you'll notice that at the beginning of this Psalm there is the instruction "according to Lilies," or "according to Shoshanim." Scholars think that Shoshanim is the melody that Psalm 69 would have been sung to—Psalm 45 has the same tune. Now nobody knows what that Shoshanim melody sounded like, but I like to imagine maybe it was something like Johnny Cash's song about that flood that hit his family's farm, "Five Feet High and Risin'" or Bob Dylan's "A Hard Rain's a'Gonna Fall"---I imagine it didn't sound much like "Showers of Blessing"—

- But if the Psalmist here and elsewhere knew of the power of rising waters to destroy, then surely they knew also of the power of the God to whom they cried out. As we have said before, lamentation, complaint, crying out for rescue, are not evidence of a LACK of faith, they are ACTS of FAITH—because you do not cry out for rescue to one who is powerless to do anything—you cry out to the one who can transform the situation—and so even though the Psalmist lets God know in verse 3 that they’re getting tired of waiting, they give no indication that they doubt God’s ability—this is why in verse 1 we read, “Save me, O God,”—because the Psalmist believes God can do just that.
- And certainly the Psalmist knows the power of God over the power of the waters --the MAYIM—in the Hebrew tradition, the foundational event for the people of God is the Exodus from slavery in Egypt, when God opens up the sea and the people pass through on dry land but the Egyptians are swallowed up by the water, and so it is proclaimed “Yahweh is a warrior God, the horse and rider he has thrown into the sea”—in the story of creation, God moves upon the surface of the dark deep waters—the MAYIM--, bringing order from chaos-- the story of Noah demonstrates God’s wrath through the sending of floodwaters, and his redemption through His promise to never again send such devastation—
- And as Christian readers surely we are reminded that Jesus demonstrates his power and his identity as the Messiah when he calms the storm at sea, he shows his mastery of the forces of chaos when he walks upon the waters, and

Peter demonstrates his faith and his lack of it in the same way, when he walks, and sinks, with Jesus

- And so WHY does the Psalmist cry out to God for help when the flood sweeps over them? Because God is the God who has shown his power over the waters, over the very forces of darkness and chaos and sin that the sea represents—the Psalmist cries out “Save me, O God” because the Psalmist knows that God CAN save us when we cry out to Him.
- The Psalmist writes, then, of a flood. But what sort of flood is this that the Psalmist cries out in the midst of?
- I would suggest, to use a modern phrase, that it is a flood of criticism. Now that’s a phrase I’ve seen quite a bit over the last couple of years, especially in the news headlines—Prime Minister’s Brexit plan met with a flood of criticism; First Minister’s plan to cancel Brexit met with a flood of criticism; Local council’s plan to increase taxes met with flood of criticism; Local council’s plan to decrease taxes met with flood of criticism—it seems sometimes that if you are in a position of authority and you have a plan, don’t much matter what it is—you can expect to be met with a flood of criticism
- And that’s what the Psalmist speaks of here beginning with verse 4
- More in number than the hairs of my head  
are those who hate me without cause;
- More in number than the hairs of my head, now for some of us, that might not be very many—and for some of us that’s fewer every day—but let’s assume that for the Psalmist that means a lot—there are a LOT of people who hate

me without cause, many are those who would destroy me,  
my enemies who accuse me falsely.

- If we skip down to verse 9, we get a clearer picture of what's going on here  
The Psalmist writes It is zeal for your house that has consumed me;
- the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.
- So this is religious persecution, isn't ? The Psalmist says he is consumed with zeal for God's house—for the Temple, and those who insult God are insulting him—and he goes on to describe his acts of repentance and humility
- 10 When I humbled my soul with fasting,
- they insulted me for doing so.
- 11 When I made sackcloth my clothing,
- I became a byword to them.
- 12 I am the subject of gossip for those who sit in the gate,
- and the drunkards make songs about me.
- What is this flood of criticism that the Psalmist faces? It is mockery of his devout religious practices—even those who are not allowed into the Temple, who sit in the gate, the Psalmist says, even the drunkards insult and mock and make fun of me.
- Of course, we all know what the Psalmist needs. The Psalmist just needs to be reminded that “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Isn't that what we all grew up hearing? Just ignore those words, just ignore that abuse, that mockery, those false accusations—words can't

hurt you. And that may be true to an extent, and in the physical sense, but that trite little saying doesn't tell the whole truth.

- Because let me tell you, words can hurt you. Words have the power to destroy reputations; words have the power to ruin relationships; words can end marriages; words of abuse can leave scars and trauma much deeper than any fist ever could.
- Words, like water, have the ability to give life or to take it away. Words, like water, can give life or take it.
- And its because of the power of words that we hear the pain and anguish in the Psalmist's cry to be saved from this flood of criticism—these waters that have come up to their neck and threaten to drown them. And drowning is terrifying. And so through the verses of this Psalm the Psalmist cries out for salvation, for justice, for restoration, for rescue, to be avenged, until finally in verse 30 we hear a change in tone, and the Psalmist shifts from asking for something FROM God, to proclaiming what they're going to do. And what is that? Here's a hint—the Psalmist is going to use words.
- The Psalmist says: I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving.—(this is about words, y'all)
- Thanksgiving. The Psalmist has just spent 29 verses lamenting his situation and asking for rescue, and calling for justice to be done to his enemies, and now, before any answer to prayer has been mentioned, the Psalmist says "I will magnify him with Thanksgiving."

- Well isn't this a little premature? What's there to be thankful about? The Psalmist's situation hasn't changed. Shouldn't you wait until you have something to be thankful for?
- People who use text messages on their phones—I reckon that's just about everybody—but people who send text messages tend to use abbreviations a lot—some use them a lot more than others—but it seems like just about every week, I'm having to look up a new abbreviation, I guess “acronym” is the more correct term—for something—people use them a lot on Facebook too. Things like FYI, for your information, and BRB—be right back—and HBD—that's Happy Birthday—
- But several—ok many-- years ago, while I was still in medical school, I got a text on my phone from a friend of mine—but when I got it, I didn't know who it was from—it just had a phone number and at the top, and then it said, could u bring your Netter's textbook to anatomy lab today. TEEYA.
- Well I knew what my Netter's textbook was—it was a big anatomy textbook, and not everybody had one—and I knew that I had to go to the anatomy lab that day, but I could not think of anyone I knew named Tia. TIA. I don't know any Tia in my anatomy class. And she had spelled her name in all capital letters. TIA. And then it occurred to me that TIA must be an acronym. And we had just learned in our neuroanatomy class what a TIA was—a Transient Ischemic Attack—a mini-stroke. Aha! TIA! Got it! But that didn't make any sense. So when I got to the anatomy lab, a friend of mine asked if I'd gotten his text and I said yeah, and here's the textbook, but I said, listen, what's TIA?

He looked at me kind of funny and I said, in your text, you said TIA. He said, oh, that—that's Thanks in advance. TIA. Thanks in advance—

- So TIA is an acronym you use when you ask somebody to do something and you have absolute faith, no doubt whatsoever, that it's going to happen.
- So I wouldn't text someone and say "Could you drive me to the airport in Glasgow tomorrow morning at 5 am, TIA" because they may not be able to do it—and they probably WON'T do it. But I would say, "hey could you give me your recipe for that ginger bread you made last week? TIA. Thanks in advance" because I have no doubt that the person I ask is going to do what I've asked.
- And that's what the Psalmist here is saying---"Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. Let your salvation, O lord, protect me—TIA. Thanks in advance.
- And the Psalmist can be assured that it is entirely appropriate to say TIA, to offer thanksgiving while still in the situation from which they want to be delivered, because they have no doubt, they have absolute faith, in the God to whom they pray—because they know that it is their God who controls the waters, who transforms chaos into order, who brings justice to unjust situations, the God about whom the Psalms of orientation we've looked at over the past 2 weeks speak, who in Psalm 16 keeps and protects and shows us the path of Life, in whose presence there is fullness of joy and in whose right hand are pleasures forevermore. The God about whom Psalm 8 tells us,

How majestic is your name in all the earth, who establishes the moon and stars and cares for mortals under his dominion.

- To this God, the Psalmist says, Thanks in Advance.
- But the Psalmist does not offer thanksgiving without a sacrifice.
- In verse 30 the Psalmist writes, I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving. The Hebrew word that is translated “thanksgiving” there is to-DAH—it’s in your service notes, and it means not only giving thanks, saying “thank you” but it also refers to a thanksgiving offering, a sacrifice that is made—and the Psalmist says
- THIS—my song of praise-- will please the Lord more than an ox or a bull with horns and hoofs.
- Not an animal sacrifice, not an ox or a bull, but a song—a sacrifice of praise. Have you heard the worship song we sing in church sometimes? We bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the Lord?
- This is what we’re singing about. This will please God more than an ox or a bull—bring a sacrifice of praise—and this is good news to those who may not have an ox or a bull or some tangible sacrifice—the sacrifice that pleases God is a song of praise and thanksgiving--Let the oppressed see it and be glad-- you who seek God, let your hearts revive.
- 33 For the Lord hears the needy, and does not despise his own that are in bonds.
- This Psalm of disorientation—that began with a cry of desperation—ends with a sacrifice of praise, a thanksgiving in advance—let the oppressed see it

and be glad—for the Lord hears the needy—and a vision of reorientation, a call for all creation to praise the one who will bring renewal and redemption, who brings order from chaos, who brings justice from injustice, exaltation from mockery, resurrection from crucifixion—

- As we have begun to see over the last couple of weeks, and we'll see even more clearly in our next Psalm Beach sermon in 2 week—the movement from disorientation to reorientation isn't just a RETURN to the way things WERE—it isn't just a reversal of disorientation—God's transformative power brings NEWNESS in re-orientation—a future that is always more than we could ask or even imagine—and it is in the assurance of that future that the Psalmist says
- Let heaven and earth praise him,  
the seas and everything that moves in them.
- Yes, even the SEAS—the waters that in the beginning of this Psalm threatened to swallow us up—let even the seas praise him—the seas and everything that moves in them—this is a vision of re-orientation—a prediction of what is to come—a thanks-in-advance for that future in which the Psalmist has complete faith—a future that the Psalmist gives us a glimpse of when he writes in v 35
- 35 For God will save Zion  
and rebuild the cities of Judah;  
and his servants shall live there and possess it;

36 the children of his servants shall inherit it,  
and those who love his name shall live in it.

- Maybe you're feeling overwhelmed today. Maybe you're drowning in grief, in anxiety, in doubt and fear. Are the waters up to your neck? Are the words of those who mock you and accuse you and insult you rising up like a flood that threatens to sweep you away?
- The Psalmist reminds us today that we can cry out. Cry out to the one who can and will rescue us, the one whose power has been shown since the first day of creation—a power that moves on the surface of the waters, a power that splits the sea, a power that walks on the waves, a power that commands the storm to be still.
- Let the oppressed see it and be glad—for the Lord hears the needy—offer up a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving and lean on the one who keeps and sustains and rescues—the one whose power can transform a situation of disorientation into a brand-new future of reorientation that is beyond our dreams
- The Psalmist reminds us today, as does EA Hoffman in the hymn we're about to sing together, that even in the midst of the flood, even in times of disorientation, we can give thanks—we can rest in the knowledge that we are safe and secure from all alarms. What have we to dread, what have we to fear? Leaning on the everlasting arms.
- May God bless you and keep you today and every day.

- Next week will be our Big Faith Sunday—Pastor Tasha will be leading us as we look at the story of the widow’s mite in the gospels of Mark and Luke, I’m sure it will be a blessing to you, and then on the following Sunday, July 5<sup>th</sup>, we’ll return to this series, Psalm Beach. Join us for our prayer meeting on Wednesdays on Zoom, give us a call when you can, reach out to each other, and let’s keep in touch with each other, and let’s pray for each other as we look forward to being able to gather again in person not too awful long from now.
- Let’s sing together—the lyrics are in your service notes.