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Sermon 18 July 2021

Title: Psalm Beach 1 (Orientation Day)

- Good morning church—and welcome to Psalm Beach! It is a beautiful day here and we are so happy that you have joined us on this journey and we are excited to get underway. Whether you're joining us from Psalm Beach Central at the LargsNaz Sunday Brunch or you're accompanying us as part of our global online entourage, we welcome you as we return to Psalm Beach.
- We are using this metaphor of a recreational visit to a holiday destination—a day at the beach-- because probably more than any other book in the Bible, the Psalms are very much like a place we might travel to where we can find some rejuvenation—some revival—where we can be inspired and re-invigorated—we might find comfort and peace and rest, or we might be challenged and energized and enlivened—we might find a familiar spot that we've visited many times before or we might see something brand new—and there are 150 locations in the Book of Psalms so there's plenty to choose from—and we'll be investigating 6 of them together.
- You know Martin Luther called the Book of Psalms “a little Bible.” He said that a person could find in it “most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible” and that anyone who couldn't read the whole Bible could have in the book of Psalms “almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book.”

- I guess that's why you often find the Book of Psalms included with the New Testament in Bibles like this one—this little blue leather Gideon's New Testament and Psalms that my older sister Kathy gave me way back in 1983—Kathy died about 10 years ago, but I can open this up and be transported to a place where our paths cross, a place where heaven and earth meet for a little while—I'm sure some of y'all know what I'm talking about.
- Now, because this is the first Sunday in our Psalm Beach series, it's probably a good idea to provide a little background—a little orientation.
- Just as we did last year, for six Sundays, we're going to be exploring the Psalter—that's another word for 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 listening guide a "Psalm Beach phrasebook" section where you can find definitions of words and phrases that might need to be translated. The Psalm Beach phrasebook will also be on the big bulletin board in our real-life church building.
- And the first word we're going to add to our phrase book is one that you heard in the promotional video about this sermon series, the one that Pastor Tasha did the voice-over for—in that video Pastor Tasha says "come on along with us to a land nestled in the Ketuvim," as if Psalm Beach were in that area. And it is, but to be clear, the ketuvim is what the Book of Psalms is part of—it's the Hebrew word for the section of the Hebrew Bible that we call the "writings," that'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—you may have heard of people “praying the Psalms” as part of their daily devotions-- and some if not most or even all of the Psalms 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, 5 books—and the Hebrew word for the entire collection, what we call the Book of Psalms or the Psalter, is TEHILLIM—and that's why in that video and on the graphic on our postcard you'll see that we've referred to Psalm Beach as the “Gateway to the Tehillim”—and why our menu at Sunday Brunch features Tehiliim truffles today—which are delicious by the way—but what Tehillim literally means is “praises”—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--we'll look at some of them at the end of this series-- 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. If you joined us last year you'll remember that we talked a lot about how the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman had a very helpful way of looking at the Psalms—he used 3 categories, three themes in his little book “The Spirituality of the Psalms”—and this is a wonderful book if you're looking for a short and very accessible but very scholarly and

inspirational book to read as we're in this series—you can get it on Amazon for under 7 pounds—be sure to get the “Spirituality of the Psalms” by Walter Brueggemann, because there are other books with that same title by different authors—his little book called “Praying the Psalms” is also worth checking out.

- But last year we followed Brueggemann’s lead and you may remember that 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 not all of life is 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. Now it's important to remember that sometimes, especially in a Psalm of re-orientation, when the psalmist is giving thanks for being rescued from a situation for instance—we'll see all three of those themes as the story is told of how things were going well, (orientation), then trouble came (disorientation), but God brought deliverance (reorientation).
- There are lots of ways of categorizing the psalms of course—and it's a helpful thing to do because there are 150 of them—that's a lot of real estate to try to get a handle on.
- And so another way of thinking about the Psalms is to consider their "genre." In the same way that in a bookstore we might categorize books by genre, so we'd have "fiction" and "non-fiction" and comedy and biography and cookbooks and biology textbooks and in a record store we'd see "blues" and "rock" and

“bluegrass” and “classical” music—over the next 6 weeks we’re going to use 5 categories to talk about the types of psalms we’ll be exploring.

- We’ll talk about each of these categories when we get to a psalm that fits into it—and over the next six weeks we’ll see at least one of each of the 5 types—but right now I want to let you know what those five categories are
- First, some psalms are Laments. And these can be individual or community laments—psalms where there’s a crisis—it might be an illness or a false accusation or a war or famine—and there’s a call to God for help—that’s a lament.
- Secondly, there are Hymns of Praise—we’ve already mentioned the way that the Book of Psalms ends with several hymns of praise in a row, and these are psalms that invite the psalm’s audience to join in praise and adoration to God, and typically talk about why He is worthy of it.
- Third—there are psalms of Thanksgiving, and these can be individual or community thanksgivings—just as there are laments that say “we’re in trouble, please help us,” there are psalms of thanksgiving that say to God, “thank you for helping us.”
- Fourth, there are Royal psalms. Royal psalms are called that not really because of their literary characteristics, their style or their content, but because they originate from an event associated with a Davidic King in Jerusalem—maybe a coronation or a battle or an anniversary celebration—we’ll look at a royal psalm next week.

- And finally, there's the category that today's psalm fits into, and those are Wisdom psalms. Wisdom psalms are those psalms that some scholars say are derived from the Wisdom tradition in ancient Israel—that's the philosophy and theology that we find primarily and most obviously in the book of Proverbs, where, and this is an over-simplification and a generalization, the basic idea is: Do good, love the Lord and things will go well and you'll be happy; don't and they won't
- Simply put, the Wisdom tradition reflects that sense of orientation that we've mentioned—the wisdom tradition—think about the things we read in Proverbs and the way Job's friends responded to him when he was suffering—the wisdom tradition sees life and the world and the whole universe as ordered and predictable and just—things make sense—and there is a clear delineation—a clear contrast—between good and evil—the good and the righteous is associated with happiness and blessing and prosperity, and evil and the ungodly is associated with suffering and lack and misfortune.
- But just as there's more to life than just the good times, the times that make sense, there's also more to the Psalms than just the Psalms of Wisdom—and the way that the Wisdom tradition sees the world doesn't always line up with the way we may be experiencing it—but the way the Wisdom tradition sees the world can be a good reminder that its point of view is the truth about life, the universe and everything IN GENERAL—in overall terms, when you consider life as a whole—even though in specific terms, things may not seem to be going well—things may not make sense. But as the modern psalmists Lester Flatt and

Earl Scruggs have reminded us in song, we can “know that the good times outweigh the bad.”

- As we explore today’s psalm, Psalm 1, we’ll talk more about the Wisdom tradition and we’ll prepare ourselves to move forward, to advance and progress into the fascinating land we’ll be exploring over the next 6 weeks.
- Psalm 1 is more than just the first Psalm—it also functions as a preface, not just to the first Book of the Psalms, Psalm 1-41, but to all 5 books in the Psalter—in fact, Psalm 1 was in some versions of the Psalter an unnumbered introduction to the book—and so there is a sense that Psalm 1 provides the reader with an orientation, a guiding theme, and an introduction to some of the main characters, namely the Lord, the godly, and the ungodly, that will be seen in the 149 psalms that follow.
- So Psalm 1 gives us a sense of the overarching message that we’re going to see guiding us as we work our way through the Psalms—Psalm 1 gathers us together and gives us a sort of universal meaning to the whole collection of the Psalms, a way of understanding it as we move forward--just as the Wisdom tradition’s sense of “orientation” provides a consistent and abiding truth about life and the way we progress through it
- And that sense of wholeness, of generality, that Psalm 1 provides is emphasized by the fact that Psalm 1 is composed with an intentional poetic structure that we often find in Wisdom literature—because in the original Hebrew, the first word of the Psalm begins with the first letter of the alphabet and the last word of the psalm begins with the last letter of the alphabet—and this gives the psalm a

sense of totality, a sense of all-inclusiveness, like some holiday resorts where everything is included—from A to Z, from alpha to omega

- And the overarching, totalizing message that Psalm 1 presents us with is this—there are two ways to live—there are two kinds of people, two ways to be—and they are in stark contrast to each other. And so Psalm one uses antithesis—contrast—to talk about the wicked, and the godly.
- The psalmist begins by saying “happy are those who”— the word here that is translated as “happy” is sometimes translated as “blessed” in some versions of the Bible—but the Hebrew is “*esher*” --And one of the things that makes “*esher*” unique here is that it not only means happy, but the word that it is derived from means to go straight on, to advance, to move forward—and we’ll see that this sense of the godly as the ones who move forward with purpose, whose path is straight, continues through the Psalm—even in English we might talk about a person who is straight as opposed to crooked, which means evil or wicked or criminal—to “tell it to me straight” is to be honest—to get to the point
- and so the psalmist is going to tell us about the godly who are happy—about the righteous who make progress, who advance, whose way is straight—but the psalmist does so by immediately contrasting the godly with those who are NOT—with the wicked, and sinners, and scoffers—the psalmist begins by telling us that “happy are those who do NOT—who do NOT do three things
- Happy are those who do NOT: 1) follow the advice of the wicked—the word for wicked there is *rasha*—we’ll see it again in a bit—happy are those who don’t listen to what the wicked have to say—who don’t allow themselves to be

instructed by the wicked—so this is about instruction—2) happy are those who do not take the path that sinners tread—that word for sinners is a different word from *rasha*, it refers to criminals, those who are guilty—happy are those who don't follow their example—who don't move down the path that the ungodly have taken—so this is about behaviour—and 3) happy are those who do not sit in the seat of scoffers, another word here for those who mock and ridicule wisdom and truth—happy are those who do not plant themselves in one spot and critique and deride the truth—so this is about attitude

- BUT—and here comes the contrast, and here is the picture about where those who are happy get their instruction, about their behaviour, and about their attitude, hear this now—the Psalmist says “but their DELIGHT is in the Law of the Lord”—here's the picture of their attitude and the source of their instruction—the law of the Lord—the torah—and this means not just the written torah, the Pentateuch, but the Lord's direction and the Lord's word—this is what Jesus was referring to when he said “one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”—so that's the attitude of the one who is happy, delight, that's where the one who is happy receives instruction, from the *torah*, and now the psalmist tells us about the behaviour of the one who is happy—the psalmist writes in verse 2, “and on his torah they meditate day and night”—that word that is translated “meditate” there means to recite in a low voice as one thinks about and contemplates the scriptures—it is what a person does who prays the Psalms—saying them out loud in a state of reverence and openness—

- And so the psalmist has here contrasted the happiness---the forward progress of the one who is godly with the one who is wicked by telling us about the source of their instruction, about their attitude, and about their behaviour
- And now the psalmist moves on to give us some more description of what the godly are like, saying they are like trees planted by streams of water—they are near the source of life and nourishment and they are connected to it, day and night, 24-7, and so they yield their fruit in season—here again is that wisdom-orientation sense of order—there is a time to produce fruit, and it’s not always harvest time—they produce fruit in its season—according to the timetable of the gardener—when the time is right—by the way the yogurt parfait at the Sunday brunch today features “fruit in its season”—they produce fruit in its season—so it’s not always harvest time but the psalmist tells us that their leaves are always green—they are always filled with life because they are planted near the source of living water and they aren’t moving away from it, so their leaves do not wither—
- in fact, in all that they do, they prosper. The word that is translated as “prosper” here is an interesting one—it’s *tsalach* and it can be translated as to prosper, but it literally means “to rush forward, to advance, to progress”—which you’ll remember is what *esher*, that word for “happy” meant back in verse 1
- So while we might be tempted to think of prospering as getting rich, or acquiring a bunch of stuff, a bunch of wealth—the kind of prospering that Psalm 1 is talking about is moving forward, progressing, getting somewhere—and so there is some irony here in that the ones who are like trees planted by streams of

water are also the ones who are making progress, who are on the move, who are headed in the right direction—they are not sitting still in the place of scoffers, they are not spinning their wheels, they are not treading water, they are not taking the path that sinners tread—and so they prosper—not by the world's standards perhaps but by eternal standards, they are on their way toward the goal and they are making good time.

- And then in the last 3 verses of the psalm the psalmist turns our attention back to the wicked, the *rasha*
- And the psalmist says that the *rasha* are not like trees planted by streams that bear fruit and whose leaves don't wither, those who are happy and prosper, moving forward, progressing toward their goal—no, the wicked are not so, they are like the chaff that the wind drives away—the word there for wind is *ruach*—it's the word for breath and wind and spirit—it's the word that is used for the spirit of God that Adam is filled with and becomes a living being—it's the spirit of God that moves upon the surface of the deep waters at creation—but the wicked are not filled with the *ruach*, they are driven away by it, they are dispersed and dissolved by the very spirit and breath and wind that could bring life and power and wholeness—the very Spirit by which Jesus is raised from the dead—the Spirit that guides and directs those who yield to its direction, but the wicked are not so
- And so they won't stand in the judgement, sinners won't be found in the congregation of the righteous, because the way of the wicked—their twisted path, their wandering off course, their crooked approach—will perish—it will

not last—I can't help but hear Jesus' imagery of the vine and the branches here—those branches that bear fruit and those who are cut off and cast away the imagery is so similar

- But the Lord watches over the way of the righteous—as they advance, as they progress, their path does not lead to destruction, because they are going somewhere, they have a destination, they have a goal, they are heading toward the promised land, toward the New Jerusalem, toward a land that is fairer than day, and by faith we can see it afar, where the Father waits over the way, where He has prepared for us a dwelling place
- And so Psalm 1 gives us an orientation for the psalms to come, but it also gives us a guide to our lives as well—because even though we may not always feel happy, we may not always think that it looks like we're prospering—we may feel like our leaves are withering—we may feel disoriented--stuck, and weighed down, and like we're not making any progress whatsoever—that's the time when we can come to this place of orientation, when we can be reminded by the writers of the wisdom psalms that even though our real-life situation may not reflect the way Psalm 1 describes it—we can pray this psalm—we can meditate on this word here in Psalm 1 day and night, we can speak it aloud--because praying this psalm in the midst of disorientation can be a form of protest against the way things are, and 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 holiday, a time of rest and rejuvenation and revival—like a day at the beach

