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Sermon 1 August 2021

Title: Psalm Beach 3 (Lamentation Day)

- Good morning church, and welcome again to Psalm Beach! We are so glad you're travelling with us again today and we welcome those of you who are joining us at our Sunday Brunch as well as those who are worshipping with us online all around the world—we appreciate your presence and we trust that you are blessed and challenged by what you see and hear today.
- Metaphorically, it's sort of a dark and dreary day at Psalm Beach today—but the one thing we can't control when we're on holiday, as I'm sure we've all learned from experience, is the weather. Sometimes it's sunny and bright, and sometimes, it rains. Sometimes the storms come, and the darkness falls, and the way forward may be hard to see—we may get disoriented as we travel every now and then.
- This has been a kind of somber week for me personally as well—this week marked the ten-year anniversary of the death of my big sister, Kathy. She died back in 2011 after a long struggle with chronic illness. She was just 53 when she died—that's 2 years younger than I am now—and of course, for the last two years I have often wondered why it should be that I was given more time on this earth than she was—I guess that's kind of what they call survivor guilt—I certainly don't deserve a longer life than she had, and she certainly didn't deserve to be ill for so long or to die so young, but you know I remember around the time of Kathy's funeral, so many people wanted to offer

some comfort, like we all do when someone's going through a tragic situation, and it's hard to know what to say but you feel like you need to say something just to show that you care and you're trying to help—but you certainly don't want to say anything that would make things worse—and so people would say things like “We're so sorry for your loss” and “please let me know if I can do anything” or “I made you this banana pudding”—that was probably my favourite thing that anybody could say—but other folks, and I know they meant well, and I know it's difficult to know what to say, and that they were just trying to help—but they'd say something like “we'll understand this better by and by--everything happens for a reason” and I'd think, “Yeah, and the reason my sister died was she had Crohn's disease and had to take immune-suppressing drugs for decades and eventually her body couldn't take it anymore and she died.”

- Other folks said things like “God must have needed another angel in Heaven”—and I KNOW they were only trying to help, and I KNOW they didn't mean any harm, but NO, NO, NO—people don't die because God didn't create enough angels and decided to take your sister or brother or your child—it's hard to know where to begin to explain all that's wrong with that theology
- But I remember thinking, “if you're trying to make me feel better by telling me that God did this, whatever His reason was—to teach some lesson or to make something else happen, then don't—because that's not helpful—and it's also not true—it is true God can bring good out of any situation, even the most tragic, but that doesn't necessarily mean he caused the tragedy in the first place—and I just believe that all too often folks, especially when they have to make sense of tragic situations, have a tendency to give the devil too much credit and to give God too much blame—sometimes things happen

because we live in a fallen world—a world in need of redemption and healing and salvation—a world in which people are free, as we saw in Psalms 1 and 2, to choose the path of the wicked or the path of righteousness—

- But my point is this—and I know you’ll be glad to hear that I do have one—when we start trying to wrap our heads around the problem of theodicy—the fact that bad things happen, even to good people, the fact that there is evil in the world, and yet God is powerful and good, if we’re not careful we can wind up recommending a kind of fatalism that just accepts the way the world is as part of God’s plan—as if this is the best of all possible worlds and we shouldn’t criticize it or complain about things that happen or situations that we see, or situations that we find ourselves in, because we ought to just accept them and give God glory and praise and thanksgiving and celebrate all the time how awesome and wonderful and how perfect His creation is and how everything makes sense if we just leave it alone and let it run its course.
- I have even heard folks say that they felt like if they complained or were unhappy or dissatisfied about something they were going through, or about some situation they saw in the world, that they were being unfaithful—that they had a lack of faith—I’ve heard folks say “I know I shouldn’t feel this way” when they were confused or angry or indignant about something—like they were being ungrateful or whiny because they felt that things were not the way they ought to be—
- But that’s not what the Bible teaches us
- And that’s certainly not what the Book of Psalms teaches us
- Because as we learned last week in our Second Helping Bible study, even though the Book of Psalms is known in Hebrew as the Tehillim, the praises, most psalms are not

hymns of praise, nor are they psalms of thanksgiving, nor wisdom psalms or royal psalms, the vast majority of the psalms are laments—even though Psalms 1 and 2 tell us about the happiness that the righteous are blessed with as they prosper and the wicked perish, most psalms are not about that sense of orientation in which God's in his heaven and all's right with the world, most psalms are hymns of disorientation, in which God's still in His heaven but all is certainly not right with the world.

- Most psalms—67 out of 150, in fact--are laments—laments that look at some situation and find it unacceptable and cry out to God to change it and make it right. And the presence of these laments in the book of psalms tells us that lament is not just an acceptable and necessary part of life, but also part of worship—these laments in the Book of Psalms would have been part of the corporate worship of ancient Israel—like the songs of praise and worship that we hear sung in Christian churches all over the world—but you know, if you think about the worship songs that Christians sing these days, especially the contemporary praise songs, churches sing an awful lot about how awesome God is and about joy and praise and victory, but those worship songs that would qualify as laments are few and far between, if you'd ever hear one at all
- Back in 1986, Walter Brueggemann wrote an article in the *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* about the “costly loss of lament,” and more recently Michael Card and other Christian musicians have written and spoken about the damage that can be done to the church's witness and our mission when we forget the place and the purpose of lament—when our worship is all about celebration and orientation and praise and we forget our prophetic voice and the power of petitionary prayer—when we worship from the safety and security of our sanctuaries, gazing upon the world through rose-

coloured stained glass windows, and ignore the suffering and injustice and evil in the world

- When we discount or disallow the practice of lament—in our personal lives and in our worship—we run the risk of becoming irrelevant and inauthentic—that is, we are dishonest if our worship is only about how great things are because for many life is anything but great—and for each one of us, our days are not always going to be all sunshine and rainbows—the rain is going to fall—we live in a fallen world that needs healing and transformation—and how can we be part of the world’s redemption unless we can see and cry out against what’s wrong? There is a time for celebration and praise and there is a time for lament—a time for petition—a time to let God know that we want Him to move—to wake up and do something—and the laments in the Book of Psalms remind us of the way our relationship with God is supposed to work
- And so while our first Sunday in our Psalm Beach excursion was an Orientation Day, and our second Sunday was a Coronation Day, this Sunday is a Lamentation Day—and while our first two Sundays were all about orientation—those times when things work together as they should, when things make sense, when things are going well and we’re making progress—today is all about disorientation—when things fall apart, when things make no sense, when things are going bad and maybe they’re not going at all—those times when we don’t seem to be getting anywhere, but we’re stuck in a place we don’t want to be—that is the time to lament—that is the time for lamentation—and so the psalmist whose voice we hear in Psalm 39 is a lamenter, or I guess you could call them a lamentater. I actually suggested that we put lamb-n-taters on the menu at today’s Sunday Brunch, but I did it too late and the menu had already been finalized.

- Now, the fact that laments figured so prominently in ancient Israel's worship and that they so figure prominently in the Book of Psalms and in the Bible as a whole is not without good reason. And I want to suggest 3 things this morning—I want to share with you 3 reasons why lament—lamentation-- is not something that we should avoid, nor something we should feel guilty about, but something that is useful and even necessary not only in our personal lives but also in our worship, both as individuals and as the church—and that's why a Psalm like psalm 39 and 66 others like it are in the Bible—and as we explore these three reasons, we'll explore Psalm 39 as well.
- And the first of these three is this, you'll see it there in your listening guide, number 1: Lament is cathartic. It empties us out. It is cleansing. It lightens the load. It allows us to “let it all out” as we might say to someone who needs to “have a good cry” when they are suffering.
- In Psalm 39 we hear about someone who is suffering—but also someone who is mixed up, confused—the psalmist here moves back and forth between hope and despair, between redemption and transgression, between life and death—Robert Alter writes that the psalmist in Psalm 39 flounders in a world of radical ambiguities—in between contrasting realities—in Psalm 39 we don't see the clear distinction, the clear contrast between 2 ways that we saw in Psalms 1 and 2, here the psalmist isn't this way or that way, but in between, mixed up—and one of the contrasting pairs of realities that we find the psalmist between is speech and silence.
- Now we don't know exactly what is causing the psalmist's troubles here—some scholars think it's illness, and there's mention of some enemies—but it's clear that the psalmist does count himself among the righteous because he tells us about the wicked

(remember the word *rasha* from Psalm 1) who are around him—and it's these wicked who are causing or contributing to the psalmist's troubles—and he thinks he might be able to help the situation by, as we read in verse 1—putting a muzzle on his mouth—keeping quiet, shutting up—now we don't know if the wicked are using his words against him, or if they're mocking him for complaining about his situation--and there are some people who love to say that people who speak out about the way things ought to be are just whining—just being a whiner—I guess you might say “greeting” here in Scotland

- I love that word “greeting”—for any non-Scottish-speakers, “greeting” means complaining or whining or crying—so a baby who cries all the time might be called a “greetin’-faced-wean”—see, I’m learning the local lingo—
- You know, at the church Pastor Tasha and I attended back in South Carolina we used to have people who welcomed folks as they arrived on Sunday morning—they gave them a bulletin, and shook their hands or gave them a hug—they “greeted” them—like Carol and Stuart do at our Sunday brunch, without the hugs and handshakes of course—so they were called “greeters.” But when we got here to Scotland we discovered that calling somebody a “greeter” might not be a compliment—and you certainly wouldn't want a bunch of “greeters” out at the front of your sanctuary welcoming people to church—but there are certainly churches that have more than their share of “greeters,” that is for sure—and some folks love to send you their greetings
- But the psalmist decides he or she is not going to greet—he's not gonna say anything at all—he's gonna be silent and still and hold his peace—and how'd that work out? Did things get better? No—verse 2 tells us “my distress got worse—my heart grew hot

within me—while I mused the fire burned”—you see what’s happening here? The psalmist is giving himself heartburn—when he decides to keep his concerns and his suffering all bottled up and not give expression to his troubles his very heart is burning up like the campfire on the stage at Sunday Brunch today—at least I hope it’s there, I haven’t built it yet

- But the psalmist’s decision to muzzle himself makes things worse—he’s so afraid he’s gonna say the wrong thing—to sin with his tongue that he says nothing at all and it burns him up inside—but then, at the end of verse three, we read, “Then—when my silence was damaging and inflaming my very heart—”then I spoke with my tongue” and the psalm concludes with the petition, **‘Hear** my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to **my cry”**
The psalmist is silent no longer, but pours Himself out in lament
- I love to listen to the blues—I love blues musicians like BB King and Muddy Waters and Stevie Ray Vaughn—I even try to play the blues every now and then—and singing the blues is lamenting—blues songs are about lament—they’re about giving voice to your troubles, even setting them to music and sharing them with others—things like “I woke up this morning, I was feeling bad—my heart was burning within me, I wanna be happy, but I’m sad—I got the blues—low down lamentation blues”—something like that—and some folks who don’t understand the blues will listen to that and say “man, why do you want to listen to that? That’s depressing”—but the truth is that it’s not depressing, it’s cathartic, because it’s lament—Buddy Guy, he’s a legendary blues guitarist, he said this— he said “Funny thing about the blues—you play ‘em ‘cause you got ‘em, but when you play ‘em, you lose ‘em.” That’s because lament is cathartic—giving voice to our situation doesn’t make it worse—it lightens our burden, it cools that heartburn down—and so I

like to think of Jeduthun, he was one of David's key musicians—you can read about him in 1 Chronicles chapter 16—around verse 40—and he's mentioned in the superscription of Psalm 39—and I like to think of Jeduthun—Jed, I think his friends called him—I like to think of him as a blues musician because since there are more laments than anything else in the collection of Psalms, it seems to me that ol' Jed would know a thing or two about the blues and its therapeutic power—how lament can begin to lighten the load of suffering and grief, and even of guilt and shame—because lament is cathartic. That's our first point.

- And our second point about lament is this: Lament demonstrates our relationship with God—it shows us how we are to relate to God and how God relates to us—when we read the laments in the Book of Psalms we see examples, not of the way we ought NOT to be—but of the way that it is perfectly acceptable and necessary to be in relation to God—and in Psalm 39 we see someone who approaches God, not in fear and formality, but with authenticity and all the brokenness and confusion—all the mixed up feelings associated with his condition—the psalmist does not approach God as one might approach a Greek or Roman god, a god who has to be convinced or coerced into caring about our situation—the psalmist doesn't offer some bribe in exchange for God's assistance—he doesn't keep his request short and to the point in fear that God might get annoyed with him—he has no apprehension about God's quick temper or irritability or unpredictability—he is in distress and he cries out to God, and He has faith that God will not only pay attention to Him, but will do what he asks Him to do. And this is the case EVEN THOUGH, the psalmist knows how his mortality, the finite span of his existence, compares with God's eternity—he knows that he is a mere mortal and God is

the transcendent, everlasting creator—and so the psalmist acknowledges his limitations—he knows that his life is just a few handbreaths, that his lifetime is nothing in the sight of God—the psalmist reminds us, foreshadowing the kinds of ideas we’ll hear in Ecclesiastes, that Surely everyone stands as a mere breath. Surely everyone goes about like a shadow.—That word “breath” there in verse 5, by the way, is not the word “*ruach*” that we’ve seen before, that means spirit or wind or breath, it is the word *hebel* that means a vapour, but also futility and vanity—it is the word the writer of Ecclesiastes uses when he writes “Vanity—all is vanity and vexation of spirit.” It is that which is without substance, that which passes away like your breath on a cold day.

- Also that word “selah” that you see in verse 5 and again in verse 11—we really don’t know what that means—literally it can mean “forever” or “to lift up,” but many scholars think that it’s a musical notation telling the musicians to pause briefly. *Cole-selah* is of course a side dish that goes with a BBQ sandwich.
- And so the psalmist knows where he stands—he knows who he’s talking to—he knows that he is only God’s passing guest, an alien passing through this world. But still he vacillates from expectation to despair, from telling God that He is his hope to blaming God for his troubles—that’s around verses 10 and 11—and what the psalmist asks for also meanders and wanders as well—he begins by only asking God to let him know how long he’s going to live in verse 4—as if to say, if I have to suffer like this, then at least let me know how long it’s going to last—like a patient saying to his doctor “tell me how long I’ve got, Doc” –the psalmist wants to know that his tribulation won’t last forever—and then in verse 7 the psalmist exhibits a little bit of optimism, saying to God, “My hope is in you,” and asking to be delivered from his transgressions—“Do not make me the

scorn of the fool” he says, and we see some assurance, some clear faith when the psalmist says to God “it is you who have done it,” BUT almost immediately the psalmist begins to see God as the cause of His troubles, and asks God to stop hitting him—that’s what “remove your stroke from me means” and by the time we get to the end of verse 12, all the psalmist asks of God is that He stop looking at him—turn your gaze away from me, the psalmist says, as if God’s watchful eye isn’t providing protection but misery—“turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again before I depart and am no more”—there is no hope here of resurrection—no looking forward to an afterlife—when I’m dead, I’m dead, the psalmist thinks—I will cease to exist—but maybe I can smile once before I am no more—this is all the psalmist is asking for at the end of the psalm—and there is no thanksgiving—there is only the cold honesty of the despair and darkness from which the psalmist cries out for deliverance.

- But that’s the important point—even in the midst of his confusion, his suffering, his despair, the psalmist cries out—the psalmist laments—and in His lament, for all its darkness and hopelessness, there is faith—faith in the one who entered into a covenant relationship with His people—faith in the one who has promised to provide and to watch over and to protect and defend—Walter Brueggemann writes that one of the functions of lament is to remind God of the obligations of His covenant—can you imagine? The audacity to say to God, “hey you remember we made a covenant, right?” We had a deal—we both have obligations—we both made promises—imagine the boldness—a mere mortal, a breath, a vapour, like a moth around a flame—but this is what laments like Psalm 39 remind us of—the fact that we can, even in our hopelessness and despair and mere mortality—we can boldly approach the throne of

grace and bring our concerns, our petitions, even our doubts and confusion, and have a conversation with Almighty God—as we heard in the hymn this morning--- Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged; take it to the Lord in prayer!—We SHOULD never be discouraged, but there are going to be times when we are—and Psalm 39 reminds us that we have the kind of relationship with God that allows us to come before Him in our discouragement, in our confusion, in our lament. Lament demonstrates our relationship with God.

- And one final point about lament and it's this: Lament changes things. Lament changes things because a lament is a prayer and prayer changes things. Lament is not simply complaining about a situation or about something that happened or about the way things are—though there is certainly an element of complaint to a lament—complaint is certainly part of it—but lament is complaining AND asking for help from the one who is most able to do something about your situation—it is going to the one who can do all things—the one who brings life from death, the one who transforms chaos into order, scarcity into abundance—and not only the one who CAN, but the one who WILL do more than we are able to ask or even imagine—even when we don't know what we are asking for or how to ask for it, even when we are simply asking why, even when we are just giving voice to our distress, just sharing our need and our suffering, we are not demonstrating a lack of faith but a faith that God can respond and does hear us and cares about our situation.
- Jesus himself, in the pivotal moment of his earthly ministry, in the midst of the torture and suffering and degradation of the cross, in that moment when he is most clearly being emptied out, Jesus cries out in lament, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken

me?” and that lament was not motivated by a lack of faith but by the surest, clearest, strongest faith there ever was.

- When we lament, we are testifying that God cares, that God listens, and that God can and will do something---And that doing something may involve giving us the power and strength and motivation and creativity to change things ourselves—it may involve the Holy Spirit’s building the kingdom through us—in order that God’s will be done on earth as in heaven—we may be challenged to be the instruments of redemption—to be the body of Christ -- because Jesus told his disciples not just to go and teach but to go and HEAL—to CHANGE THINGS that were not the way they ought to be
- When we looked at Psalms 1 and 2, we said that they provided an overarching sense of purpose, a theme that we could be reminded of as we journeyed through the Psalms—and that theme, as we saw when we looked at the ideas of what it is to be “happy” and to “prosper” is one of moving forward, of advancing, of progressing, and so as we’ve visited the dark and dreary disoriented world of Psalm 39, we’re reminded to keep on moving—to keep holding on—to have patience in a time of lament—and as we move through Psalm 39 even though verse 13 leaves us still in the midst of lamentation, we are reminded of the words of Psalm 30, that weeping may last for a night, but joy comes in the morning—and if we just hold on past psalm 39, past the lament, if we just keep travelling, keep waiting on the Lord, pretty soon we’ll turn the page and get to Psalm 40, and we can sing with the psalmist: I waited patiently for the Lord, He inclined and heard my cry—He lifted me up out of the pit, out of the miry clay—I will sing—sing a new song

- Maybe you're living in a time that calls for lament today, and the message for you is this: don't be silent—lament. Even if you don't know how long you'll sing that song of lament, cry out to God, give voice to your concerns and your complaints and your suffering—claim psalm 39 as your own and join the psalmist's voice—but remember you won't always be singing Psalm 39, because Psalm 40 lies just ahead,—you won't always be singing the blues, one day you'll sing a new song.