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Sermon 15 August 2021

Title: Psalm Beach 5 (Say It Again)

- Good morning church and welcome to the penultimate Sunday in our 6-week visit to Psalm Beach! We are so thankful that you have chosen to be with us this morning, whether you're joining us from our Sunday Brunch at our church building on Aitken Street here in Largs, or you're watching us online from places all across the globe—wherever you are, we're glad you're here with us, and we trust that you have been blessed by what you have seen and heard and that you have worshipped with us and felt the presence of God right there where you are in a very real and tangible way.
- This is the 5th Sunday that we've taken a virtual holiday to the Gateway to the Tehillim, the Book of Psalms. And if you were with us, you'll remember that we spent the first four Sundays in Book One of the Psalms, that's psalms 1-41. We began with Psalms 1 and 2, a wisdom psalm and a royal psalm that formed the introduction to Book One—those two psalms of orientation told us about the way that the righteous do not follow the paths that the wicked take, and then told us about how the nations and peoples of the world would do well to acknowledge not only God and His laws but also his Messiah if they wanted to prosper and to be happy.
- Then in week 3, we saw in Psalm 39 a “lament,” a psalm of “disorientation,” a desperate cry to God for deliverance and salvation—psalm 39 was an appeal to

God for “reorientation.” And we learned that even though many of us may feel that lament is inappropriate or somehow demonstrates a lack of faith, the very opposite is what the Bible teaches, because when we lament—when we cry out to God because things are not the way they ought to be, we are having faith in God’s ability to deliver us AND His promise to answer our prayers when we bring them to him—and so lament is one of the most faithful things that God’s people can do, and we can know that God is faithful and we will in time be in a place where we give God thanks for what He has done for us.

- And that was what we saw last week in Psalm 41—a psalm of thanksgiving for God’s love and mercy and provision—for providing “reorientation” where there had been “disorientation”— the psalmist reminded us that happy—are those who take care of the needy—because as the righteous provide for those in need, so God provides for them, and protects them, and keeps them in His presence forevermore—and so the psalmist in psalm 41 was thankful for the way that this promise of God’s faithfulness had proven to be true—and would continue to be true as God worked through history in the lives of His people, in time sending His own Son, whose crucifixion and resurrection would offer to all flesh the opportunity to reorient their disoriented lives and be delivered, and healed and set on the path toward all that God has promised for each and every one of us today.
- And Psalm 41, we learned, was the last psalm in that first collection of psalms, Book One. But today we are going to jump ahead to Book 5, that’s psalms 107-150, and in Book 5, we are going to spend a little while considering Psalm 136.

- Psalm 136, like Psalm 41 that we looked at last week, is a psalm of thanksgiving—but psalm 41 was an individual psalm of thanksgiving—it was about one person’s story of deliverance in a time of trouble, but psalm 136 is a community psalm of thanksgiving—because in it we find that the whole congregation, the whole people, are giving thanks to God for bringing reorientation from disorientation, deliverance in a time of trouble—and not just once, but again and again and again—repeatedly.
- And as we walk through Psalm 136, we’re going to talk about repetition—about things that are repeated. And surely you had to notice that one of the most prominent characteristics of Psalm 136 is repetition—you can’t miss that line, that phrase—those 6 words—for his steadfast love endures forever—that’s repeated in every other line of the psalm, for a total of 26 times in all—the second half of each and every verse in Psalm 136 is made up of the exact same 6 words. Over and over and over again.
- Every Sunday, Pastor Tasha and I call my parents in Fort Oglethorpe, GA—we find out how their week has been, and what they thought of the online service—which they’ve usually seen 2 or 3 times by the time we call them in the evening—but this last Sunday we were talking to my Dad, and if you weren’t aware, my Dad has been a preacher in the Church of the Nazarene for right at 70 years now, he was a pastor and a missionary, and so he’s been in a lot of churches—but last Sunday he was telling us about a church that he had visited recently, and this particular church apparently sang a lot of modern worship music—but my Dad was describing the worship music at this church, and he

said, “They sang a lot of those 7-11 songs.” And after he said it, Tasha and I sort of looked at each other and raised our eyebrows and shrugged our shoulders because didn’t either one of us know what he was talking about—and so we asked him, we said, “Dad—what are 7-11 songs?” And he said, “You’ve never heard of 7-11 songs? That’s those songs that have 7 words, and they just repeat them ‘bout 11 times before they start a new song.”

- And we knew what he was talking about, too, because one of the most common complaints you hear about contemporary worship songs is that they can get a little bit repetitive, and redundant, and they say the same thing over and over again—like I just did.
- But if Psalm 136 is any indication, and it is—the kind of repetition that we hear in 7-11 songs is nothing new in worship music—we’ve used that technique of saying the same thing over and over again in our worship for a few thousand years—in fact, since psalm 136 repeats these same 6 words 26 times, I guess you could call it a 6-26 song and not a 7-11 song.
- If you think about it, we find repetition in so many memorable songs and poems and speeches—because it’s powerful—repetition gets words and ideas into our heads and the rhythm that repetition creates moves us at a physical and emotional level, in our hearts, it gives movement and progression to the words—the feeling that it’s getting somewhere—repetition, when it’s done right, inspires us, captivates us and invites us to join in—can you resist being pulled in, can you resist participating when you hear someone sing “I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy,

down in my heart—where? down in my heart—I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy. .

Repetition is powerful.

- And repetition works not just in poetry and lyrics but in prose as well—studies have shown that even if a statement is false, and a person knows that it’s not true, the more often they read it or hear it, the more they begin to believe it—there’s a whole industry involved in fake news and social media that is built on the fact that if you tell a lie often enough, people will accept it as fact—and so the power of repetition can be used for evil—it can have negative effects—because repetition is powerful—but the good news is that repetition can also have positive effects—like when Dr. Martin Luther King told a crowd in Washington in 1963 again and again “I have a dream”--
- You know, I can’t help but wonder what the effect on the civil rights movement would have been if it had not been driven by the infectious repetition of those magnificent words, and we might also wonder how World War Two might have unfolded differently had Churchill not told us “We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.” Repetition is powerful.
- And so this morning I want to look at this repetitive Psalm, Psalm 136, for just a little while, and I want to share with you 3 examples, 3 places where the psalmist uses repetition to help those who are reading along, and singing along in worship, to help them remember and internalize and participate in the powerful truths that are communicated here.

- And we're not going to start with the most obvious example—those 6 words that are repeated in every verse—in fact, if we take a look at the psalm without that re-occurring phrase and look at what we are left with, we can see other places that the psalm uses repetition to make us aware of what's most important here.
- And the first example we might notice was this, we see it in verses 1,2,3, and then 26: this phrase: O give thanks. We read there beginning with verse 1, skipping over those 6 words, remember: O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, O give thanks to the God of gods, O give thanks to the Lord of lords, and then at the end of the psalm, in verse 26: O give thanks to the God of heaven.
- So there is no ambiguity about what kind of psalm this is—it is a psalm of thanksgiving, and it is not one individual's thanksgiving, it is a command to all of those who are members of the community who hear or read these words to do something. To do one thing. And that is to give thanks—the psalm begins and ends with this one simple, clear command, and there is no other command, no other direction, no other instruction given. There is one thing, and only one thing, on the agenda—O give thanks—if you are hearing or reading this, the psalmist has a job for you to do, and just so there is no confusion about what it is, the psalmist says it—O give thanks, and then says it again, O give thanks, and then says it again, O give thanks, and then just in case your mind has wandered during the course of verses 4-25, the psalmist reminds us again in verse 26 what we are called to do. O give thanks.
- Don't you love it when you have only one thing on your to-do list—no multitasking, no piece-mealing, no distraction—and that's what the psalmist is

saying here to those who hear and sing and read and pray this psalm—there is one thing to be done—and isn't it good to be reminded to take the time to remove the distractions, to focus on the task at hand and nothing else, and the task at hand here is a simple one—O give thanks.

- And who are we giving thanks to? The psalmist spends this whole psalm telling us who we're giving thanks to. And the psalmist begins by using the Lord's proper name—there in verse 1, O give thanks to the LORD--the Hebrew is Yahweh, Jehovah,--the ineffable name—and the psalmist uses it only once in the whole psalm—in verse 1 and nowhere else—we don't hear it again. And it seems to me that doing that really stresses the authority of the name of God—it is a name that only needs to be said once—it holds that kind of power and authority
- I remember when I was a kid if I was outside playing with my friends my Mom would call me when it was time to come in for supper or to go to church or whatever, and if she just said "Steve, it's time to come in" I knew that I could sort of let that slide for a little while and keep playing, but once she said "James Stephen Fountain, it's time to come in," I knew that was it—it was time to come in--I knew she was only gonna say that ONE time—when she used my full and proper name, it carried power and authority—and so even though the Psalmist spends the next 26 verses telling us about WHO we are called to give thanks to, we are only given the proper name once, here in verse 1. O give thanks to Yahweh.
- And then in verses 2 and 3 and 26 the psalmist gives us God's aka's—titles that He is also known as—his aliases, we might say—the God of gods—the Hebrew

there is *Elohim*, and the Lord of Lords, the Hebrew there is where we get the word *Adonnai*—and these are another example of repetition—God of gods, Lord of Lords—this is repetition to make a point about God’s superlative position-- like when we say King of kings or the Song of songs--and then finally the psalmist calls Yahweh the God of Heaven in verse 26.

- So that is WHO we are called to give thanks to—and just as the command to give thanks is simple and clear, and the one to whom we are to give thanks is simple and clear, Yahweh, Elohim, Adonnai, the God of Heaven, so also the reason we are being called to give thanks is simple and clear—there in verse 1—for He is good. As simple as that—the what, the who and the why—what: give thanks; who—to Yahweh—why? for He is good. That “what, who, and why” are what the entire psalm is about—all the other words and images and statements are there as support for a simple command—O give thanks to the Lord for He is good. Say it again and again, “O give thanks.”
- Now the psalmist doesn’t just give us God’s aliases, these titles He’s also known as, and he doesn’t just TELL us THAT He’s good—the psalmist goes on to provide some proof, some evidence, some rationale behind the command to give thanks to God who is good. And so verses 4 through 25 give us a kind of divine résumé, a CV that provides a list of what God has done, in addition to what He is called.
- And these things that God has done—these acts of God, all contain the same word, and that word is part of our second example of the repetitions here in Psalm 136—and that word is “who.” And you may notice in your listening guide that the word “who” that’s in each of these statements occurs 10 times—4 times

in verses 4-9, and then another 4 times in verses 10-22, and then twice in verses 23-25—and you'll see that those verses are grouped like that so that we have 3 separate sections of text between the "O give thanks" verses at the beginning and the end of the psalm.

- Let's look at what is happening in these three sections, because there is an important pattern here, a story about who God is and what he has done that is being told in a very specific way.
- Now notice in verse 4, here's the first "who"—the first description of God—who alone does great wonders—so this is a statement about God's power and uniqueness—there is no one who does great wonders like God does—and notice that this is in the PRESENT tense—it's a statement about the way God IS and what God DOES—present tense—but from verse 5-9 we're going to be in the past tense, and the psalmist is going to be telling us about what God HAS DONE—remember we are only looking at the first part of these verses, we're setting those 6 words aside for a little bit—and when we look at what God HAS DONE in verses 5-9, we see that the psalmist is listing God's great wonders on a universal scale—we're looking at the big picture—all of creation—and so the psalmist tells us that Yahweh is the one who by understanding made the heavens,—by understanding—that means He knew what he was doing, He didn't do it on a whim or by accident--verse 6 who spread out the earth on the waters, 7 who made the great lights, 8 the sun to rule over the day, 9 the moon and stars to rule over the night,

- So this first section, verses 4-9, gives us a picture of God as the creator, as the one WHO has created everything from the land to the sea to the sky and all that is in the sky out into infinity and beyond—this is a description of the God of the infinite, of the universe—of big things, bigger than we can even imagine, and if that were all the psalmist told us about God, that would be reason enough to give thanks, that would be reason enough to say that God is good—because He made everything that is, everything anywhere that there is anything, God made it—but the psalmist doesn't stop there—in this second “who” section, verses 10 through 22 the psalmist reminds the community, the people of God, that the God of the history of the universe, is the God of the history of their people as well—the one who made the earth and sea and sky and the sun and moon and stars is the one who heard their cries and delivered them from bondage and made them His people and guided them and provided for them and defeated their enemies and gave them hope and salvation and a promised land to inherit—we hear that story beginning with verse 10, remember, we're reading without that second part of these verses—notice we're still in the past tense, talking about what God HAS DONE—four whos here
- 10 who struck Egypt through their firstborn, and brought Israel out from among them, . . . who divided the Red Sea in two, and made Israel pass through the midst of it, but overthrew Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea, who led his people through the wilderness, who struck down great kings, and killed famous kings. . . and gave their land as a heritage to his servant Israel,

- And then on into the next section, verses 23 and 24 give us a summary of all that has just been said in that second section—notice that the description of what God has done is still in the past tense—what he HAS DONE--23 It is he who remembered us in our low estate, 24 and rescued us from our foes,
- What is the point that the psalmist makes here? The SAME God who created the universe, who brought forth the land from the chaos of the watery depths, the SAME God who hung the sun and moon and stars in the sky, the SAME God who created the universe and all that's in it, that same God is the God who remembered us in our lowly estate, who rescued us from our foes—the transcendent God of the cosmos was interested in our plight, and delivered us and guided us and protected us and gave us a promised land
- But there's one last "who" there in verse 25—now remember back in verse 4 we started out in the present tense—who alone DOES great wonders—before the psalmist shifted to the past tense to talk about all that God HAS DONE—all that God did—but now in verse 25 we return again to the present tense—and in the same way that we moved from out in the universe, out in the heavens and the infinite, INTO the history of Israel and their specific real-life experience, so now in verse 25 we move back out again from the history of the people of Israel and we read this description of God, that He is the one WHO—WHO gives food to all flesh. He is the one who provides, not just for the people of Israel but to all flesh—and He is not simply the one who HAS PROVIDED in the past, but He is the one who DOES provide in the present and will provide in the future—provide for whom—just for Israel? No, for all flesh—there is only one

qualification there—if you’re made of flesh, God provides for you and He will continue to provide for you—if we had time, we could say an awful lot about the word “*lechem*” there—it means food but it more literally means bread—and when we think toward the New Testament and the gospels and the Bread of Life that God will provide for all flesh—not to mention the place of “Beth-lechem,” or Bethlehem, the Hebrew for “bakery” or “house of bread,” in that narrative—but that is a subject for another time

- The point I want to make about the shift from past tense to present tense here in verse 25 is this—I believe the psalmist is telling us here that the story of God’s wondrous acts in creating the universe, and in rescuing and protecting and providing for the people of Israel, this is not a story that is simply past, it is not over yet, **because the story of God’s steadfast love is a story that repeats, over and over again.**
- What the psalmist has done in Psalm 136 has been to show us the evidence that proves God’s goodness, by reminding us what He has done-- but as any good scientist knows, part of proving a hypothesis is demonstrating that it is repeatable. **That it happens again and again and again.**
- And so we see a third example of repetition that we find here in psalm 136, when we consider that phrase, “for His steadfast love endures forever,” that re-occurs following every single line of the psalm. We see that even in the very structure of this psalm, the way it is put together, the psalmist is reminding us of the way that God’s steadfast love is woven in and through history, it is in the very way that it’s put together, so that when we read between the lines we see that

whatever happens, whatever God has done or is doing, in it and through it and behind it is his steadfast love.

- That term “steadfast love” there is a translation of the Hebrew word “*chesed*”—and that’s a word worth remembering, so you’ll find it in your Psalm Beach phrasebook today, and it’s a word for love that’s as important in the Old Testament as the word “agape” is in the New Testament—it’s a way of talking about a kind of loyal, unconditional love—*chesed* is sometimes translated as “lovingkindness” or “mercy”—it occurs a total of 248 times in the Old Testament—we see it again and again—and it connotes a zealousness and passion—*chesed* is the kind of love that does not fade or wither—it remains—it endures—it isn’t going away
- Now, *chesed* isn’t simply something that someone does, or something that they feel, but someone has *chesed* because it is part of who they are—it is a characteristic of the one who possesses it—and so God’s *chesed* endures forever because God endures forever—as long as God is, so is his *chesed*, because *chesed* is what God is—that’s why he created the universe and all that’s in it, that’s why he delivered the people of Israel, and that’s why He provides for all flesh, because of His *chesed*—his steadfast love.
- And so whatever the first part of a verse in Psalm 136 says, the second part of it returns us to God’s constant and abiding *chesed*—his steadfast love endures forever---the constant refrain that underlies all of our lives, all of history, so that there is newness and novelty, like the first part of each verse, but recurring and supporting that newness is the constancy and eternity of God’s steadfast love—

like a metronome that provides the rhythm as the melody develops, like our heartbeats and the recurrent inspiration and expiration of the breath in our lungs as we go about our daily activities, so God's steadfast love, His *chesed*, provides the foundation to our lives and to the life of all of creation. His steadfast love endures forever.

- As we read Psalm 136 we look to the past and see God's *chesed*, his steadfast love, at work in the creation of the universe, and in the deliverance of the people of Israel, but the psalmist wants us to know that God's *chesed* isn't a thing of the PAST—it endures—it repeats—what God has done before He will do again, and so we can also acknowledge God's *chesed* at work in our own lives and the psalmist's words can become our own—and we can say, here and now:
 - give thanks to the Lord for He is good—his steadfast love endures forever—
 - He who by the power of the cross delivered us from sin and guilt and shame, his steadfast love endures forever—
 - who lifted the burden of my past and set me on the path of life everlasting, his steadfast love endures forever,
 - who made a way when there was no way, say it again, his steadfast love endures forever—
 - who brought us through a pandemic, His steadfast love endures forever---
 - who brought peace and purpose to our lives, say it again, his steadfast love endures forever—and you can add your own story to the story of God's steadfast love, because what God has done in the past He is doing in the present and He

will do in the future—age to age, He's still the same— say it again, His steadfast
love endures forever.