

THE FOLLOWING IS THE SCRIPT THAT PASTOR STEVE USED TO PREACH FROM. IT IS NOT WRITTEN FOR PUBLICATION, AND MAY CONTAIN TYPOS AND/OR GRAMMATICAL ERRORS. IT MAY ALSO DIFFER SLIGHTLY FROM THE RECORDED SERMON.

Sermon 22 August 2021

Title: Psalm Beach 6 (Hallelujahs)

- Good morning church, and welcome once again to Psalm Beach—we're are so glad you have joined us again on our scriptural excursion through the Psalms, and whether you're joining us at our Sunday Brunch right here in beautiful downtown Largs, or you're worshipping with us online, we are thankful that you have taken the time and made the effort to be with us. Wherever you are, we're glad you're here.
- This is our last day at Psalm Beach, our final port of call, the end of our journey. Today we say farewell, aloha, Happy Trails, vaya con dios and return to the status quo—business as usual. But it ain't over yet, even if it is our last day.
- If you're anything like me, you take the last day of a summer holiday pretty seriously—it has always seemed to me that when you're on holiday every day is special and memorable, but there's just something extra special about that last day—so you wanna do something extra special, something that puts the cherry on top of your vacation— the way you spend that last day, for me anyway— affects the way you will remember the whole holiday—this is the reason Disney World ends every day with a huge parade and fireworks—a grand finale— because they know that some folks will be packing up and leaving in the morning, and the way their Disney experience ends is going to affect the way they remember it—and it will determine how soon they return to the Magic

Kingdom—but you know it’s kind of a general rule that we like a good ending—we like a big finish—it’s better to go out in a blaze of glory, to go out with a bang—than to just fade away—that’s why when you go to a concert, the band is probably not going to open with their biggest hit—you go see Neil Diamond and you’re gonna have to wait till the very end of the show to hear “Sweet Caroline”—stand-up comedians, too, like to go out on a high note—toward the end of their act they’ll tell a joke and if it gets a really good response, they’ll say “That’s it for me—you’ve been great, goodnight!” and they’ll leave the audience laughing.

- One of my favourite teachers, the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, he certainly understood the importance of ending well. He wrote some 600 years before Christ these words—he said “People usually fail when they are on the verge of success, so give as much care to the end as to the beginning.” Of course where you start out from is important for any journey, anytime you’re trying to get from one place to another or from the start of a project to the finish-- but the truth is that where a person starts out pales in comparison to where they end up—that’s true no matter what you’re doing or where you’re going, and it’s true about life in general—endings are important
- The editors who put the psalms together, the folks who way back a long time ago decided that there would be 150 psalms in the psalter, and that they would be organized into 5 books, they had to make some decisions about how the Book of Psalms would be put together—and they put Psalms 1 and 2 as the preface to the whole Book, we’ve mentioned that before, and then they had to decide how

they would organize the various types of psalms in each collection, where to put each of the wisdom psalms, and the royal psalms, and the laments, and the psalms of thanksgiving, and one last genre of psalm that we haven't looked at yet in this series, and that's Hymns of Praise.

- Now you might wonder, “aren't all the psalms ‘hymns of praise?’” particularly if you know that the Hebrew name for the Book of Psalms is the *tehillim*, the “praises,”—but the label “hymn of praise” is reserved for a specific type of psalm, and that is a psalm that is a public song—not private or individual but one that's sung by a congregation in public—and these public songs to be sung with abandon—they are not reserved or subdued—they invite worshippers to let go of their inhibitions—they say to us, “Don't be shy about this thing—put your whole heart into it”—and what they invite us to put our whole hearts into is simply the praise of God for who He is and what He has done—because he is good and faithful and loving and powerful and He has created all things and liberated our people and provides for us as we move toward the place that He has prepared for us.
- And when the editors of the psalms thought about how they would end the book—how they would bring all five collections to a close—they knew that the ending was important, and that the way they ended the whole collection of collections of psalms would affect the tone and the theme of the book—it would say something about where the collection gets to—and it would imply something about what's important in our lives and in our worship of God, too—

and knowing all that, they decided that psalm 150, the psalm that has the last word, would be a psalm of praise—but they didn't stop there.

- They also decided that psalm 149, the next to the last psalm, the penultimate psalm, should also be a psalm of praise—and they decided that psalm 148, the next to the next to the last psalm, should be a psalm of praise, and also psalm 147, the next to the next to the next to the last psalm, and also psalm 146, the next to the next to the next to the next to the last psalm, so that the last 5 psalms in the Book of Psalms form a 5 part concluding doxology for the whole book—
- We learned last week how the psalms use repetition to make a point—and that's certainly what's going on in the last 5 psalms
- and so when we think back to where we began in Psalm 1—that psalm told us that the righteous, the ones who do not follow the paths that the wicked take, the righteous are happy—the word was *esher*—getting somewhere, moving ahead, making progress—and as we travelled along with the psalms from orientation to disorientation to reorientation, from wisdom psalms about how ordered and predictable life was to laments that complained and protested against the fact that things were not the way they ought to be, to thanksgiving for God's liberating and healing power—as we moved through all of that—the place we were on our way to, our destination—is a place of praise—and not just a little bit of praise, but 5 psalms in a row that invite us to take part, with abandon, in a triumphant crescendo of praise.
- We find that invitation, the command to “praise the Lord,” at the beginning and the end of all five of these psalms—it's in the first verse and the last verse, every

time—praise the Lord. The Hebrew word there for the verb “praise” is *hallu*, and its root is *hallel*, a verb that doesn’t just mean to sing praises but also to boast about, to brag on—and so at the beginning and the end of each of these psalms is a command to brag on the Lord—to talk about, to sing about, to proclaim, how good He is, and how great and how merciful, and what great things He’s done—

- And in this phrase, “praise the Lord” at the beginning and end of each of these psalms, the Hebrew word that is translated as “the Lord,” is “Yah,” and that’s a shortened form, a contraction, of the proper name for God, Yahweh—you’ll remember how last week we pointed out that in Psalm 136 God’s full and proper name is used, but only once—well here when the psalmist uses the shortened form, we’re hearing what you might call God’s nickname—the way we use “Steve” instead of “Stephen” or Jim instead of James or Alex instead of Alexander—Yah instead of the longer Yahweh
- And when we put the form of the word *hallel* and the word *Yah* together to say praise Yah—boast about Yah—we get “hallu Yah”—which becomes alleluia in the Greek and Hallelujah in English—and so when we hear the alleluias in Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus, or “Glory, glory hallelujah” in the Battle Hymn of the Republic, or anytime anyone says “hallelujah,” what we’re hearing is a command to “brag on the Lord, to praise Him” in the language of the ancient Hebrew people.
- And when you read Psalms 146-150, these 5 praise psalms all together, you might think that they all say pretty much the same thing—Hallelujah, praise the Lord-- over and over again—and they certainly do have that in common, but

there are also ways that they are different from each other, too. Now, this morning we don't really have time to look at all 5 of these hymns of praise that the Book of Psalms ends with, but I do want to take just a few minutes to point out just a few characteristics that are unique to each of the last three psalms, the ones that Pastor Tasha shared with us and that are there in your listening guides—148, 149, and 150.

- First, Psalm 148—it's there in your listening guide. Psalm 148 begins and ends, like the other 4 psalms, with the command to “praise the Lord, *“hallu-Jah”*—but in between those two commands we find a hymn of praise that is not just a hymn of praise but also a creation hymn, and as you heard, it is about ALL of creation—all the created universe—and the psalmist doesn't just ask the congregation to praise God because He has made creation, he calls on creation itself to praise God because he has created all things.
- And so, using language that mirrors the Genesis account of creation, the psalmist begins the psalm out in the heavenly realm—Praise the Lord from the heavens, in the heights—and everything that's in that realm, angels and the heavenly host and even the sun and moon and stars, and the waters above the firmament as the Hebrew people believed—let all of them praise the Lord because He created them and determined their boundaries, outside of which there is nothing—as far out into infinity as you can get, the psalmist is saying, all of that is and contains God's creation. Praise the Lord from the heavens. Hallelujah.
- But then in verse 7, the psalmist moves from heaven to the earth—starting with the mightiest and most threatening, chaotic element on the earth, the deep seas

and the monsters that live there—and we see that even those scary things like sea monsters are told by the psalmist to praise God because God created them—if you're enjoying the sea monster skewers at our Sunday Brunch today, I do hope they are not too scary, but what the psalmist is saying here is a reminder that all of the universe, all of the heavens and all of the earth, is God's creation—the threatening and unpredictable seas, the weather from winter to summer, from pleasant breezes to hurricane force winds—all the geological features and the vegetation on them, all the animals and birds, and all the people, too—from Kings to paupers, young and old, men and women—this is my Father's world, all nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres—

- The psalmist is driving home the message that there is one God, one creator, who made all things and without whom nothing was made—that's the message that we are monotheists—we believe in the one true God, and it is He who is worthy of our praise—Certainly we need to take seriously the powers of evil, and the way we talk about Satan or the Devil, but we ought to be careful not to take them so seriously that we become dualists—thinking that there's a good God and a bad God, and in the end the good God's gonna defeat the bad God—that's Zoroastrianism, that's not Christianity—we are monotheists, and Psalm 148 is a great reminder of that fact, an affirmation of the words of the Apostles' creed—I believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth—the one and only Creator, the one and only God
- Now in Psalm 149, we will move from the general, from a hymn of praise addressing all of creation and calling them to praise the Lord, to a more specific

call to the Hebrew people themselves. That is a movement that begins in the last verse of Psalm 148, when the Psalmist tells us that God has raised up a horn for His people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to Him.

- Raising up a horn suggests the imagery not only of the raised horn of a living animal, a bull or a ram who is victorious in battle, but also the raising of the trumpet or the shofar that sounded the beginning of the Sabbath or the start of a war or the year of Jubilee or at other times of celebration.
- And you might also notice there in that last verse in Psalm 148 that the word “praise” is not a verb, as in Hallelujah, or “praise the Lord,” but a noun—and that noun is the Hebrew word *tehilah*—the plural of which is *tehillim*—or praises, which you’ll remember is the Hebrew name for the Book of Psalms—and so when the psalmist tells us that God will raise up praises—*tehillim*—we are reminded that God is the source not only of our praises but also of these praises—all 150 of them—and that even our praise that we offer TO God is not something that we possess or something that we produce, but something that God raises up in us. Something that God allows us to do—and we’ll see that idea in Psalm 149 as well.
- Now let’s focus on psalm 149 together. The psalmist in Psalm 149 is suggesting, even commanding, the people of God to do several things, all of which are tied up in praising God—and all of which occur between the two hallelujahs—the “Praise the Lords” at the beginning and the end of the psalm



- Now one thing you'll notice about psalm 149 is that the psalmist uses the word "let" quite a bit here—"Let Israel be glad," and "Let the faithful exult in glory"--and on the one hand the psalmist isn't really asking for permission or asking God or someone to "allow" them to do something—the psalmist is using the word "let" as we would when we say "Let's go" or "let's get pizza for dinner"—we're not asking anyone to "let us" do it—we're giving a suggestion—a command to do something—but on the other hand there is also the sense that anything that the people of God or anyone else for that matter, might do, is allowed by God's grace—and so alongside the Psalmist's suggestions or commands to the people of Israel is also a kind of prayer to God to allow it—to allow them to be glad and to rejoice—because it is through his allowance, his mercy and grace, that anything that the psalmist might suggest or command is possible---and what the Psalmist is suggesting or commanding here is for Israel, the children of God, to praise Him and be glad with dancing and melody-making with instruments like the tambourine and the lyre—and the reason the psalmist is telling them to do this is because, as we read in verse 4—because the Lord takes pleasure in His people, and adorns the humble with victory—
- Now if you'll look with me at verse 5 you'll see that the psalmist even tells the people of God to sing for joy on their couches—and that makes sense because they would certainly need a place to rest after all that praising and dancing and exultation, but even on the couch, the song of joy is still being sung—
- but then the hinge occurs—there's a bend in the road, a twist in the plot—because the psalmist suggests that the people of God not only do all this praising

and such, but something else as well-- because in verse 6, what God's people are called to do takes a turn from celebration and dancing and relaxing—to something very different—

- In verse 6 the psalmist writes of the people of God: Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, 7 to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples—and it goes on to talk about binding their kings and their nobles with fetters and chains of iron—to execute on them the judgement decreed—
- Well, this is a switch—we were just dancing and having a party and stretched out on the sofa--and now we're headed into battle and taking kings and nobles prisoner?
- And on the face of it, this is very militaristic imagery—this sounds like a call for Israel to take up arms against the rest of the world and to seek revenge with the weapons of war—and we might wonder how we reconcile such language with the words of Jesus—the Prince of Peace, the one who tells us in no uncertain terms that we are to love our enemies—the one who said “blessed are the peacemakers.”
- And as is often the case—as is always the case in fact—when we run across that kind of apparent contradiction—when we read in the Scriptures what might look like something other than the Law of Love that we know has been given to us by the one whose steadfast love endures forever, and the one who emptied Himself of all but love, when we think we have hit a snag, then it's a good idea to dig a little deeper in the Word—

- and particularly when we read the psalms, it is important to remember that this is poetry we're reading, and poetry uses metaphor and symbolic imagery and word-play and has an abundant depth of meaning beyond the superficial face-value of the words—particularly when those words have been translated into another language—modern English in our case. And when we step back and think about what the psalmist has written here, when we join our understanding with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and consider the psalm in the context of the entirety of Scripture and tradition, we find that there is much more than meets the eye here.
- Specifically, what I want to share with you is the language in verse 6, where we read: Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands—now that sounds an awful lot like that song that was popular during World War 2—praise the Lord and pass the ammunition—I'm not quite old enough to remember that firsthand, but the psalmist writes: let them have praises—high praises in their throats—the Hebrew there is literally the word for throat or neck, and in their hands, two-edged swords—a weapon of war, an offensive weapon designed to inflict injury and if need be, death, on one's enemy.
- But what we miss in the English translation but we would hear in the Hebrew is that what is translated as “two-edged sword” literally means “a sword of mouths.” I know that sounds strange but that is literally what the Hebrew says, “let them have the praise of God in their throats and a sword of mouths in their hand”—and so the imagery that the psalmist uses moves from the throat to the mouth—and if we meditate on that language just a little bit we might recall how

the book of Proverbs and Psalm 64 tell us that the tongue is like a sword, and we might remember how in the book of Revelation, chapter 19, when Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords executes judgment on his enemies, he does so with the sword that comes out of His mouth—a sword that is described as “double-edged” in Revelation chapter 1—and we might also remember that the book of Hebrews, chapter 4 verse 12 describes the word of God as sharper than any two-edged sword—and if that weren’t enough to think about, we might also discover that the word in the Greek—in the Greek in the New Testament, now—that is translated as “double edged” is *distomos*—two *stoma*, two mouths—in the same way that the Hebrew “sword of mouths” is translated as “double-edged” as well—then we might begin to realise that what the psalmist is getting at when he talks about the people of God having praise in their throats and a sword of mouths in their hands might be about more than just a sharp piece of metal— we might begin to see that there is more going on here than just talk of literal swords and battle—we might begin to see that this is about the power and authority of the people of God to speak with their prophetic voice and to execute judgement—to proclaim God’s truth and God’s will even to the leaders and the nobles of the world—to help make things the way they ought to be

- This is surely a message that the church needs to hear today—this is surely a prayer that needs to be prayed today, that God would let His people sing his praises AND have the courage and the strength of conviction to use the prophetic sword of their mouths to speak truth to power—to say the powers that be, to the leaders of the world—and this means our OWN leaders as well, when they’re not

doing what they ought to be doing—to tell them with clarity and conviction that they need to do right, that they need to get right—to let them know when they’re defying God’s will and going against the Law of love, and justice and peace and righteousness and mercy, when they’re oppressing His people and exploiting his creation, when they’re leaning on their own understanding and living just to satisfy their selfish desires and their greed and their hunger for power—

- There comes a time when the people of God are called to get up off the couch and let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands---amen? Seems like we’ve spent the last year and a half worshipping from our couches—and maybe the time has come to get up and to speak out—hallelujah.
- Now let’s look at our third psalm, Psalm 150—it’s a shorter, sort of a summarized or condensed hymn of praise—it says praise the Lord in His sanctuary, and in His mighty firmament—inside and outside—that’s “where”-- and then the psalmist tells us why—because of his mighty deeds and his surpassing greatness—and then the psalmist tells us HOW to praise him—with trumpets, and lute and harp and tambourine and dance and strings and pipe and clanging and clashing symbols—pretty much any instrument, and dancing—this is that abandon we spoke of earlier—the psalmist is inviting us to worship with all we’ve got—and this is of course a fitting place to end the Book of Psalms—a big finish, a grand finale
- But the specific statement in psalm 150 that I want to take a look at for a moment is the one in verse 6: Let everything that breathes praise the Lord.

- That statement is also often translated “let everything that has breath praise the Lord.”
- And you might think that the Hebrew word that is translated as “breath” there would be the word “*ruach*,” that word that we know means “breath or wind or Spirit,” and is used for the breath of God that moves on the surface of the waters at Creation and that animates each of us and departs when we die—“*ruach*” in the Old Testament is very much like “*pneuma*” in the New Testament—we know this
- However, *ruach* is not the word that the psalmist uses here.
- The Hebrew word that is used here in Psalm 150 and is translated as “breath” is *neshamah*—it’s in your Psalm Beach Phrasebook today, and it is the word that is used in Genesis 2 verse 7 when God creates Adam and breathes into his nostrils the breath of life. This word *neshamah* –it comes from the verb *nasham*, and *nasham* doesn’t just mean to breathe, it means to pant—the kind of breathing that a person or an animal might do when they are hungry for air—after exerting themselves, running or fighting or working—the word is used by the prophet Isaiah to describe the breathing that a woman in labor does—it is the breathing that we do when we just seem not to be able to get enough oxygen and have to rapidly take in as much as we can—it’s the kind of breathing that exposes how utterly dependent we are on the air that we breathe, the way that we rely absolutely on a steady supply—and so when the psalmist declares let everything that breathes—*neshamah*—praise the Lord, we are reminded that like Adam, our very breath comes from God, we are reminded that we are utterly dependent

upon God's provision, that we are helpless without it, and not only us but the entire universe and everything in it--but we are also reminded that God supplies our needs through his abundant riches in glory, that he is faithful to provide, that he hears and answers our prayers when we cry out for deliverance. We remember that, as we heard way back in psalm 1, the righteous are like trees planted by the water that yield their fruit in season and their leaves do not wither but in all that they do they prosper because the Lord watches over their way—we are reminded that, as we saw in Psalm 136, His steadfast love endures forever, it is He who gives food to all flesh and who remembered us in our low estate. As Psalm 148 tells us, he is the one who created the universe and everything in it, and in Psalm 149, he is the one who takes pleasure in his people and adorns the humble with victory—and so in Psalm 150 we hear all of that packed into this final word, this parting thought, this benediction: Let everything that breathes praise the Lord. Hallelujah.