

Breathe: 3. Dealing with disappointment, anger, and pain
Psalm 13; Psalm 137; Psalm 90:12
July 23, 2017
Pastor Steve Richards

Two weeks ago, when I displayed this photo of a calendar [picture of wall calendar completely filled with appointments], I heard from a lot of people that their calendar looks like this, or if not the calendar, then their lives. And what surprised me was how many retired people told me they do not have room for anything else. I don't want your life to look like this. I want you to have room to breathe. But I think we've forgotten how or never really learned how to breathe. Life is better when we breathe, but when something other than God drives us, it pulls us away from what matters most. So, I suggested a breathing exercise, and last week, Tami repeated the exercise. Some of you told me you were reluctant to do it: To relax, to close your eyes in a dark room, to breathe deeply – you're asleep, but trust me you would not be the first person to fall asleep in this place! Breathe, just breathe.

Here's the problem: stuff happens. Things outside our realm of control happen to us – a medical condition, an injury, a relationship is in trouble, as one of your kids is going to bed she mentions needing a costume for her classroom presentation the next morning, your work increases or you lose your job and you can't find the one you want, a tree falls on your house or the car dies. All it takes is one of these because our lives already feel overwhelming. You have all you can handle and then something unexpected happens and the whole thing falls apart. Life becomes unmanageable. And you cry, "O God..." or "O my God..." Even if you don't know if you believe in God, you can't help yourself – something deep inside us cries out for something beyond ourselves. We need help.

In the Bible, that cry is called a lament – a cry for help. And in the book of Psalms, there are more laments than any other type of psalm. We often skip over the laments and turn to verses that are happier – ones that focus on trust and praise. But I think the laments invite us to be honest, to name our circumstances, release what we are experiencing. In other words, stuff happens that makes life unmanageable. "God, can't you do something?"

And that's Psalm 13, a psalm attributed to David. Do you remember David? He was living a thousand years before Jesus, and the Bible tells us he was "a man after God's own heart." In other words, he wanted to be the man that God wanted him to be. We are introduced to David when he is a child, the youngest in a family with seven sons. At the time, there is a king by the name of Saul. God selected Saul to be the king, but Saul lost favor with God when Saul ignored God, doing what was best for Saul. So, God sends a prophet named Samuel to Bethlehem in search of a new king, one who would consult with God and follow God's direction. And who does God pick to be the new king? David, the youngest of seven sons. He's like the runt of the litter. No one expected him to accomplish much of anything which is why his job is being a shepherd. So, Samuel anoints David to be the king, but David is still a kid. And there is still a king and that king is Saul. So he waits. And when Saul meets David, first as a boy and then as a young man, Saul senses that David has what Saul does not and Saul is jealous. He sees David as a threat and Saul decides the only way to remain the king is to kill David. David, fearing for his life, runs to the wilderness but Saul with an army of 3000 men is in hot pursuit. David didn't ask for any of this. He's been told he's to be the king but Saul is the king. All David wants is to be the man God wants him to be, but the most powerful man in the world is trying to kill him. And in Psalm 13, David cries out, **How long, Lord?** Four times he cries out. Each time with greater intensity, greater urgency, because God's not answering. **How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long... How long will you hide your face from me? How long**

must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? Come on God, I'm suffering here. It's me, remember me, the one you chose, the one after your own heart. David waits...

500 years later, the Jews were living in exile – taken prisoner to a foreign land – and again this psalm gave voice to their anguish: How long, God? Have you forgotten? For 50 years, they waited. How are they doing while they wait. Psalm 137 tells us: **By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion... How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?** Come on God, we are hurting. **Remember, LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. "Tear it down," they cried.** While the army of Babylon was destroying the city, the Edomites were cheering them on. Now in Babylon, their anger ranging, the psalm ends with a plea for revenge. **Happy are those who seize your infants and dash the against the rocks.** But God didn't answer that prayer. They were waiting for God when I think God was waiting for them. Breathe. Let it go. What you are feeling. Release it. Let it go.

We, too, can feel forgotten – buried under the responsibilities of living, doing the best we can – when the unexpected happens. I've been at the bedside of devoted Christians who were suffering and we prayed for a miracle and there was nothing but silence. How long, God, how long? Waiting is one of the most difficult and most godlike parts of our experience. We are waiting for God when I wonder if God isn't waiting for us.

Psalm 90 is the only psalm attributed to Moses. Moses knew something about waiting. The Bible tells us that he lived to 120 and the last 40 of those years were spent waiting for God to let the nation of Israel into the Promised Land. For 40 years, they traveled in circles, just waiting for God. It turned out that God was waiting for them. And at the end of his life Moses realizes that God's sense of time is not like ours. **A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. (Psalm 90:4)** A watch was three hours. In other words, a thousand years for God is like 3 hours. God's sense of time is not like ours. God has all the time in the world. But we don't. We are in a hurry. We get upset when the drive-through lane doesn't move. Or, someone doesn't answer our email or text message immediately. Recently, Amanda and I made a trip to Urgent Care. Have you ever sat at "urgent" care wondering why it's called urgent? It felt more like "Wait for Care". "How long, God?" We waited 6 hours before they told us we could go home. Do the math. For us 6 hours, but for God it was like 2000 years!

So Moses says, **Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom.** (Psalm 90:12) Teach us to number our days. Last week Amanda and I were walking and reflecting on how much in our lives is not what we ever expected. We are where we are in life a whole lot faster than we imagined and we are not where we imagined we would be. We spend our time as if it is unlimited and we know it's not. Moses says, Learn to number your days. Each day matters. Each day has value. Learn to live as if your days are numbered and you will gain wisdom – what to devote time to – what not to devote time to. Moses didn't gain this wisdom until the end of his life- until he ran out of time.

Bronnie Ware is an Australian nurse who spent several years working in palliative care, caring for patients in the final 12 weeks of their lives. She would ask people under her care if they had any regrets in life. In her book, *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*, she writes of the phenomenal clarity of vision that people gain at the end of their lives, and how we might learn from their wisdom. So, I thought, I would give us a chance this morning to fast forward to the end of life – Is there anything you would do differently? I want to focus on the top two, if you want all five, you'll have to read the book. Number 2: **I wish I hadn't worked so hard.** This was

not a surprise. She said, "This came from every single man that I nursed – I wish I had not worked so hard." They missed their children's youth and their partner's companionship. Women spoke of this too but because they were an older generation most women had not been the breadwinner. "All of the men that I nursed deeply regretted spending so much of their lives on the treadmill of a work existence." When you think you have all the time in the world with your kids, with your spouse, all the time – and then suddenly, like Moses, you realize you don't, you can't go back. You can't undo.

What was the number one regret? **I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.** She said, "When people realized their life was almost over, it gave them a clarity to see how much of what they dreamed went unfulfilled. Most had not even achieved half of what they dreamed and died knowing it was due to choices they had made or not made. Health brings a freedom they didn't realize until they no longer had it."

When you look at the current pace of life – when you look at what you put into or allow into your life, what do we do with that when we have precious little room to breathe? We are tempted to put more in – or increase the pace – hurry up, time is wasting...But if we don't wait, if we don't take the time to breathe, we can chase something we didn't even choose. And if you are a Christian, this is so important. God has put you here for a purpose and many of us have not slowed down long enough or waited well enough to figure out why God put you here. I want to invite you to consider something – it will happen on August 26 – mark the date. It's a Saturday morning and it may not be what you had in mind for one of the last Saturday mornings of the summer, but I am inviting you to an event called LAUNCH. We've invited a nationally-known trainer to lead this. I'm inviting you to come that morning to figure out how to use the rest of your days. It's not about finding a way to help out at church, but to launch yourself into the purpose God has designed for you.

Let me conclude with some homework. If you would take the card that you received when you entered, turn it over and write a + (plus) and a – (minus). Realizing that we only have a limited number of days, what do we do? The plus is what do I add and the minus is what do I subtract or remove completely. For some of us, it's a name. They are stealing your life – not bad person but taking too much of your time and something has got to go. What do I do more of? What do I do less of? (less video games; put down the phone and be with the people around you)

Let's repeat the verse: "I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. When I was in distress, I sought the Lord." (Psalm 77:1-2) Breathe, just breathe.

GPS for Week of July 23, 2017

Weekly Prayer: O God, sometimes I think you have forgotten me; sometimes my faith becomes very small. Please remind me that you have not abandoned me, for your faithfulness never changes. Help me to wait with patience and to trust that all time is in your hand. Amen.

Monday, July 24

Scripture: Psalm 13

How long will you forget me, LORD? Forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long will I be left to my own wits, agony filling my heart? Daily? How long will my enemy keep defeating me? Look at me! Answer me, LORD my God! Restore sight to my eyes! Otherwise, I'll sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, "I won!" My foes will rejoice over my downfall.

But I have trusted in your faithful love. My heart will rejoice in your salvation. Yes, I will sing to the LORD because he has been good to me.

Observation: This is a lament or a prayer for help. It begins with the writer's complaint, his reason for the complaint, and concludes with an expression of confidence in God. For a long time, the writer has been under attack; his suffering evidence that God has forgotten him. "How long, O Lord?" But then the writer looks back and remembers that God has been present in the past.

Application: This kind of prayer invites you to express your pain and the suffering of others with honesty. Don't hold back! God is not offended by your emotions. Psalm 13 gives voice to things we often do not talk about: abandonment, anxiety, inner struggles, failure, and the fear of death. What is on your heart that you have not been willing to bring before God?

Prayer: Hear my prayer, O God. Listen to my inner thoughts, my struggle to control what feels uncontrollable. Help me to release and let go and wait for you. Hear my prayer, O God. Amen.

Tuesday, July 25

Scripture: Psalm 137

Alongside Babylon's streams, there we sat down, crying because we remembered Zion. We hung our lyres up in the trees there because that's where our captors asked us to sing; our tormentors requested songs of joy: "Sing us a song about Zion!" they said. But how could we possibly sing the LORD's song on foreign soil? Jerusalem! If I forget you, let my strong hand wither! Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth if I don't remember you, if I don't make Jerusalem my greatest joy. LORD, remember what the Edomites did on Jerusalem's dark day: "Rip it down, rip it down! All the way to its foundations!" they yelled. Daughter Babylon, you destroyer, a blessing on the one who pays you back the very deed you did to us! A blessing on the one who seizes your children and smashes them against the rock!

Observation: The Jews in exile in Babylon gather on the banks of the irrigation canals which bring the waters of the Euphrates to the fields of the city for a ceremony of mourning over the destruction of Jerusalem and prayer for her restoration. There is no music. There is no joy, no hope – only anger and a desire for retribution.

Application: Have you ever found yourself in the place of this writer? So utterly alone and lost in grief that it seemed God was nowhere to be found – and in a moment of great pain, you wanted God to strike out again what was hurting you? Psalm 137 is an honest prayer, remembering that God hears our deepest thoughts.

Prayer: Merciful God, be close to me. Give me the reassurance that I need that you have not forgotten me. Be the healing balm in the midst of the pain that I see in the lives of others. Be close to me, O God. Amen.

Wednesday, July 26

Scripture: Psalm 22:1-3, 24-31

My God! My God, why have you left me all alone? Why are you so far from saving me— so far from my anguished groans? My God, I cry out during the day, but you don't answer; even at nighttime I don't stop. You are the holy one, enthroned. You are Israel's praise.

Because he didn't despise or detest the suffering of the one who suffered— he didn't hide his face from me. No, he listened when I cried out to him for help. I offer praise in the great congregation because of you; I will fulfill my promises in the presence of those who honor God. Let all those who are suffering eat and be full! Let all who seek the LORD praise him! I pray your hearts live forever! Every part of the earth will remember and come back to the LORD; every family among all the nations will worship you. Because the right to rule belongs to the LORD, he rules all nations. Indeed, all the earth's powerful will worship him; all who are descending to the dust will kneel before him; my being also lives for him. Future descendants will serve him; generations to come will be told about my Lord. They will proclaim God's righteousness to those not yet born, telling them what God has done.

Observation: In this prayer of lament, the writer begins with radical despair and ends in thanksgiving and praise. Three times the writer struggles through sorrow toward confidence only to be overwhelmed again by despair. In his mind, his suffering is proof that God has forgotten him. From the cross, Jesus repeated the opening words of this psalm. Some have suggested that as this psalm gave voice to Jesus' suffering, the final verses also provided comfort and reassurance of God's faithfulness.

Application: Take time today to read the entire psalm. Consider how this psalm relates to the story of Jesus. God was present in the suffering of Jesus, not causing it but allowing it and remaining the power greater than death itself. God shares in the suffering. How does that feel to know that God knows what it is like to suffer?

Prayer: Thank you, God, that you know the full range of human experience. You remain with me at the points of greatest joy and deepest struggle. You may not fix my life as I want but you point me toward the ultimate hope that you accomplished in your son, Jesus. Grant me that eternal hope each day. Amen.

Thursday, July 27

Scripture: Psalm 34

I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise will always be in my mouth. I praise the LORD— let the suffering listen and rejoice. Magnify the LORD with me! Together let us lift his name up high! I sought the LORD and he answered me. He delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to God will shine; their faces are never ashamed. This suffering person cried out: the LORD listened and saved him from every trouble. On every side, the LORD's messenger protects those who honor God; and he delivers them. Taste and see how good the LORD is! The one who takes refuge in him is truly happy! You who are the LORD's holy ones, honor him, because those who honor him don't lack a thing. Even strong young lions go without and get hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing. Come, children, listen to me. Let me teach you how to honor the LORD: Do you love life; do you relish the chance to enjoy good things? Then you must keep your tongue from evil and keep your lips from speaking lies! Turn away from evil! Do good! Seek peace and go after it! The LORD's eyes watch the righteous, his ears listen to their cries for help. But the LORD's face is set against those who do evil, to eliminate even the memory of them from the earth. When the righteous cry out, the LORD listens; he delivers them from all their troubles. The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; he saves those whose spirits are crushed. The righteous have many problems, but the LORD delivers them from every one. He protects all their bones; not even one will be broken. But just one problem will kill the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be held responsible. The LORD saves his servants' lives; all those who take refuge in him won't be held responsible for anything.

Observation: The title that precedes this psalm was likely added by early Hebrew editors of the psalms. It references a story from 1 Samuel 21:10-15 but of a king named “Achish”. The psalm intends to teach the children (verse 11). The goal of the teaching is to impart life – to honor (or in some translations “fear”) the Lord through proper speech, turning from evil and doing good, and pursuing peace.

Application: Life begins with honoring (fearing) God. Life is a gift from God. What if life was lived in gratitude to the giver of that gift? How might that change your priorities, how you treat others, and what legacy you hope to leave behind? How might gratitude for God’s gift of life even shape your experience of pain and suffering?

Prayer: Gracious God, this day is a gift, as is each day. Let this be a day to “taste and see” the goodness of life and what a blessing it is to know that you have been and always will be with me. Help me to honor you in all I do this day. Amen.

Friday, July 28

Scripture: Psalm 30

I exalt you, LORD, because you pulled me up; you didn't let my enemies celebrate over me. LORD, my God, I cried out to you for help, and you healed me. LORD, you brought me up from the grave, brought me back to life from among those going down to the pit. You who are faithful to the LORD, sing praises to him; give thanks to his holy name! His anger lasts for only a second, but his favor lasts a lifetime. Weeping may stay all night, but by morning, joy! When I was comfortable, I said, "I will never stumble." Because it pleased you, LORD, you made me a strong mountain. But then you hid your presence. I was terrified. I cried out to you, LORD. I begged my Lord for mercy: "What is to be gained by my spilled blood, by my going down into the pit? Does dust thank you? Does it proclaim your faithfulness? LORD, listen and have mercy on me! LORD, be my helper!" You changed my mourning into dancing. You took off my funeral clothes and dressed me up in joy so that my whole being might sing praises to you and never stop. LORD, my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

Observation: This psalm is associated with Hanukkah and the restoration of worship in temple following the desecration of Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century BC. (See 2 Maccabees 10) From the vantage point of deliverance, the psalmist looks back on his trouble. In good times, he had been proud and self-satisfied (verse 6). In his illness when it felt that God had abandoned him, he learned the lesson of humility. And yet, his prayer has been answered.

Application: It is tempting to read this psalm and think, “pray long enough and God will make everything right.” Rather, the answer to the prayer may be found in the discovery that there can be a deep and abiding joy (the joy of the Lord) even what the circumstances of life are far from it.

Prayer: Fill my heart with joy, O Lord. Let my heart sing with joy for this new day and your faithfulness and abiding presence in all that I face. Amen.

Saturday, July 29

Scripture: Psalm 90

Lord, you have been our help, generation after generation. Before the mountains were born, before you birthed the earth and the inhabited world— from forever in the past to forever in the future, you are God. You return people to dust, saying, "Go back, humans," because in your

perspective a thousand years are like yesterday past, like a short period during the night watch. You sweep humans away like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning. True, in the morning it thrives, renewed, but come evening it withers, all dried up. Yes, we are wasting away because of your wrath; we are paralyzed with fear on account of your rage. You put our sins right in front of you, set our hidden faults in the light from your face. Yes, all our days slip away because of your fury; we finish up our years with a whimper. We live at best to be seventy years old, maybe eighty, if we're strong. But their duration brings hard work and trouble because they go by so quickly. And then we fly off. Who can comprehend the power of your anger? The honor that is due you corresponds to your wrath. Teach us to number our days so we can have a wise heart. Come back to us, LORD! Please, quick! Have some compassion for your servants! Fill us full every morning with your faithful love so we can rejoice and celebrate our whole life long. Make us happy for the same amount of time that you afflicted us— for the same number of years that we saw only trouble. Let your acts be seen by your servants; let your glory be seen by their children. Let the kindness of the Lord our God be over us. Make the work of our hands last. Make the work of our hands last!

Observation: This is the only psalm attributed to Moses. Moses' problem was time, even though the Bible tells us he lived 120 years. He did not live long enough to enter the Promised Land. God brought him to the mountain top, enabling him to look across the Jordan River and see the Promised Land. "Teach us to number our days so we can have a wise heart."

Application: Would you live your life any differently if you knew your days were numbered? The truth is that they are! Life is short. Tomorrow is not a guarantee. Too often people look back with regret on how their days were spent. In this series, you are being invited to let God restore your life and for that to happen you must learn to breath. Just breath – and let God lead.

Prayer: O God, sometimes I think you have forgotten me; sometimes my faith becomes very small. Please remind me that you have not abandoned me, for your faithfulness never changes. Help me to wait with patience and to trust that all time is in your hand. Amen.