

“HALLELUJAH?”

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Mark D. Hostetter

Sunday, October 21, 2018

Scriptures: Job 38: 1-7, 34-41 and Psalm 104: 1-9, 24, 35c

Good morning!

Today's theme – Hallelujah – is something we don't usually give a whole lot of thought about.

Hallelujah! It's trumpets and full choir, full voice, at Eastertime. It's angels in light, and riches beyond measure being brought to Bethlehem. It's verses like we heard this morning from the books of Job and Psalms. The glory of an all-powerful God, who laid the foundations of the earth; who sends forth rains, and lightning, and fire; who commands all of creation, and all within it. “Hallelujah!” the choirs sing. Glory to our God and king! Hallelujah!

Translated from Hebrew, Hallelujah: Halle-lu – means “praise you.” And Yah – that means Yahweh, God, Jehovah. Hallelu-jah! Praise You, Yahweh! Hallelujah! And for many, that literal meaning, that heartfelt praise, that joyous acknowledgement of God's glory, *that* Hallelujah is more than enough.

There's a joke about a boy sitting on a park bench, loudly exclaiming his praise to God. "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! God is great!" he yelled without worrying whether anyone heard him or not. Shortly after, along came a newly-minted college graduate, feeling himself very enlightened in the ways of truth and very eager to show this enlightenment, he asked the boy about the source of his joy.

"Hey," asked the boy in return with a bright laugh, "Don't you have any idea what God is able to do? I just read that God opened up the waves of the Red Sea and led the whole nation of Israel right through the middle." The enlightened man sat down next to the boy and began to try to open his eyes to the realities of the miracles of the Bible. "That can all be very easily explained. Modern scholarship has shown that the Red Sea in that area was only 10-inches deep at that time. It was no problem for the Israelites to wade across." The man, content that he had enlightened this naive young person to the finer points of scientific insight, turned to go.

Scarcely had he taken two steps when the boy began to rejoice and praise louder than before. “Hallelujah,” the boy went back to shouting. The man turned to ask the reason why. "Wow!" exclaimed the boy happily, "God is greater than I thought! Not only did he lead the whole nation of Israel through the Red Sea, he topped it off by drowning the whole Egyptian army in just 10 inches of water!"

For most of us, we look forward to that glory-filled affirmation of Hallelujah, our Christmas and Easter choirs of Handel's Messiah Hallelujahs, the whole congregation standing at attention, all 5,499 of our organ pipes at full blast. Our God is sovereign! Our god is triumphant! Hallelujah!

But then too, in our culture and in our souls, we love the plaintive and haunting Hallelujah we hear as people like Bob Dylan, or K.D. Lang, or Rufus Wainwright sing the words to Leonard Cohen's very different “Hallelujah.” That one too we're so familiar with, used as soundtracks to movies like “Shrek”, and so many TV series like The West Wing, E.R., Scrubs, The OC. Did you know it's sung at 2am every Saturday night on Israel defense forces radio? It starts out:

I heard there was a secret chord
That David played, and it pleased the Lord.
But you don't really care for music, do ya?

Then as the verses go on, the meaning of this Hallelujah goes much further. And we can hear Cohen's gravelly voice, several keys too deep:

[singing]

I've seen your flag on the marble arch,

Love is not a victory march.

It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah.

Hallelujah.

Hallelujah.

Hallelujah.

Hallelujah.

There's a blaze of light in every word.

It doesn't matter which you heard,

The holy or the broken Hallelujah.

Hallelujah.

Hallelujah.

Hallelujah.

Hallelujah.

So let's take a look at this idea of "broken Hallelujah." It's actually pretty amazing. It challenges narrowness and smallness with something that is really big.

Some have called it the Power of Positive Thinking. Norman Vincent Peale, pastor of our sister reformed denomination's lead congregation up at Marble Collegiate Church, promoted this brand of theology: Focusing on the inevitability of God's victory, and taking that positive thinking into every aspect of our lives. Reflecting the good news of the gospel in our perspective on everyday life, we see any setback, any suffering, as not the final word -- rather as something that will, in the end, be defeated by the good news of the gospel.

Now some might criticize this as blind optimism, or seeing the silver lining. Or maybe just wearing rose-colored glasses. But more theologically, it can be seen as an acknowledgement that God will always prevail, will use suffering as a vehicle for grace. God present in the darkness. Whatever the approach, there is no denying the strength, the resilience, the ability to bounce back, the passion to continue to fight-the-good-fight, that those broken Hallelujah's give us.

Broken Hallelujah's can also give strength in our connections to the past, personalized history, if you will. In the south, there's a sense that history happened not only to those who went before, but to me as well. Jewish communities remember stories, such as the deliverance from Egypt, as something that happened not only in history but to me as well, as part of our long line of heritage. Likewise, there's an increasing awareness today that things like the history of slavery and our personal connection to it -- whether as the captors or the imprisoned -- can serve as catalysts today in moving the moral arc of the universe even further towards justice.

It's been said that grace enters our lives through a wound.

As we encounter history, as we visit memorials, in remembering on sacred ground of the past, in seeing God still present in and through the evils of suffering, even through the horror and pain, we come to understand the healing power too in that broken Hallelujah. It gives us the chance for redemption, for salvation, for new life today from the ashes of tragedy.

And if we see God even in and through the suffering, is God there in those who have hardened their hearts? If the divine is everywhere, if God is in everyone, is there a possibility for transformation?

On a more serious note about the Red Sea story, I was speaking with a group of 50 rabbis last week. And they had an interesting take on the legacy of that story. When the sea returned and engulfed the Egyptian pursuers, the scripture does not say that Pharaoh was killed, even though Pharaoh is the personification of evil in the story. Some Jewish scholars say Pharaoh was actually also the King of Nineveh in the Jonah story, since it was all under common control, which story happened after the Red Sea story.

Remember Nineveh was the city of corruption that very quickly -- really a lot more quickly than any other biblical turn-around -- quickly changes its ways when Jonah comes and tells them God wants them to repent. If the King of Nineveh was in fact Pharaoh, Pharaoh had seen this God's wrath before, you can just imagine how fast he'd reform if he didn't want that to happen again. It's a story of redemption, born of a broken Hallelujah.

Presbyterian pastor Fred Rogers, better known to us all from "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood," had an amazing ability to keep essential truths simple. And he used to tell the story: In the early 2000s there was a Special Olympics in Seattle, and nine contestants lined up for the 100-yard dash, each one with a physical or mental or emotional uniqueness that led them and their families to participate.

The starting signal went off, and as they began down the track, one boy fell, knees bloodied, and he started to cry. The other runners looked back, slowed down, and then turned around -- every one of them -- to comfort the boy. One little girl with Down's Syndrome knelt down and kissed the boy's knee and said, "this will make it better." The boy got up, all nine of those runners linked arms, and together, joyfully, walked to the finish line, all nine crossing it together at the same time.

When they did, everyone in the stadium stood up, clapped and cheered for a long, long time. Maybe there is a part of us that longs to know that even what's weakest about us can still ultimately count for something good. Hallelujah!

And every preacher has first-hand experience with this concept of good coming from bad. How many times have we listened to, or if we'd admit it out loud, have we preached a sermon that we thought might very well be the worst ever written -- only to see a person with grateful tears in their eyes, that heard something that spoke to their heart, to their deepest need. In the end, it's a short-sighted preacher that doesn't recognize that the space between their message and the needy listener is holy ground, sacred space where the Holy Spirit moves in wonderful ways. Hallelujah!

Not to sing the praise of bad preaching, but it reminds me of the story of an elderly pastor who was searching his closet for his collar before church one Sunday morning. In the back of the closet, he found a small box containing 3 eggs and one hundred \$1 bills. He called out to his wife to ask her about the box. Embarrassed, she admitted having hidden the box there for their entire 45 years of marriage. Confused, the pastor asked her why. The wife replied that she hadn't wanted to hurt his feelings.

He asked her how the box could have hurt his feelings. She said that every time during their marriage that he had delivered a poor sermon, she had placed an egg in the box. The pastor felt that 3 poor sermons in 45 years was certainly nothing to feel bad about, so he asked her what the \$100 was for.

She replied, "Each time I got up to a dozen eggs, I sold them to the neighbors for \$1 a dozen."

From the very beginning, our faith as Christians has been about the proclamation of joy. And when we lose sight of that joy, that hope, our broken Hallelujah's, that's when our faith seems grey and drab. From the very beginning of our Christian story to the very end, joy is at our core. The gospel of Luke begins with the angels singing "for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy," even on those bleak country hillsides and subsistence living and medical treatment in a cattle stall and manger. And at the ending of the book of Luke, with the horrors of torture and death and persecution sitting like fresh wounds in their hearts, Luke writes: "And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy."

I just got back this week from a visit to Montgomery, Alabama. We decided that the board of Auburn Seminary should meet in a place that has been so central to the social justice movements of our time. And Montgomery is in the thick of it. Montgomery was the very center, ground zero, for the American slave trade for most of the 19th century. On the banks of the Alabama River, slaves were sold daily in the town's central market. We saw the human warehouses, and the river's slave docks, the chains and the whips and the still-visible remnants of that dark time.

Montgomery was also the place of Martin Luther King's first ministry. And the Rosa Park bus boycott. And the scene of the beatings of the Freedom Riders when they arrived on Greyhound buses. And the location of the Federal District Court that systematically and nearly single-handedly in the 1960's unwound the persistent segregation in the South.

Montgomery has done an amazing thing. In the past several years, it realized its history was a means for education, maybe even a means for helping the South come to a new understanding of what being Southern means now. Even in the midst of their history of the horrors of the slave trade, the lynchings and the KKK's genocide, Montgomery residents became a center for the Civil Rights movement -- back in the 1950's and 1960's, yes, but now too, leading the way for further enlightenment and movement building for continuing social justice issues like mass incarceration and immigration reform. A broken Hallelujah.

And then on a personal level, for those suffering incomprehensible horrors, I wondered . . . How were those imprisoned and abused able to even survive? Torture, degradation, families separated and sold, never to see each other again? I suppose it's about healing when there is no cure. It's about the hope that is so central to Jews, Moslems, Christians alike -- all Abrahamic traditions. It's about the broken Hallelujah's.

It's about knowing that God is always present, even in the face of evil, in our worship, in our prayers, in our songs, in our hearts. It's what we Christians do: We bear witness to what is possible. Even in the darkest of days, our Hallelujah's still rise up.

People can cause trauma and pain and suffering, but the joy we have persists. The world did not give it, and the world cannot take it away. Joy comes from outside ourselves, outside an otherwise tragic human condition, from the love and grace of God. The joy from without becomes the joy bubbling up from within. No, we do not create joy. We enter into joy. The only condition for joy to emerge is the presence of God.

Lots of writers and theologians have focused on the source of our broken Hallelujah's. Barbara Brown Taylor writes that joy happens when God is present, and people know it. Which means that joy can erupt in a depressed economy, in the middle of a war, in an intensive care waiting room. And people cannot contain it, as it erupts in song and dance, gospel spirituals and classical "Hallelujah's" alike. They open their mouths and poetry falls out. They drop what they are doing and rejoice right where they are, no matter who is watching.

Kahlil Gibran wrote that joy is sorrow unmasked. Laughter rises from the same well-spring within, that is often filled with tears.

John Philip Newell in his book “New Harmony” explores the essential interconnectedness of all things: Only by knowing and naming the extent and depth of our brokenness, our disharmony, will we find the way forward. Confronting our brokenness, individually and together, is integral to the hope for healing. We have all seen suffering, empathized with suffering, as we encountered the history and the experiences of others. And that empathy that draws us all together, that interconnectedness that Newell speaks of. And draws us closer to God.

But we’ve also experienced suffering in our own lives, whether that be the loss of a job, or a relationship, illness, hunger, homelessness, or the death of a beloved friend or parent.

My mother, Charlotte, who many of you here at First knew well, was killed 20 years ago in a car accident as she was leaving Riverdale Presbyterian Church where she was the Sunday School director. She was 62 years old.

And within minutes, the congregation came together, first a few, then a few more, until there were dozens of people at the church. People from Riverdale Church, from First Church, from Holmes Camp, from all over the country, supporting each other, holding each other, enveloping each other in love and in suffering. Our family – my dad and my brother and my aunt and my husband, all of us – never had an instant when we felt abandoned or alone. Over 1000 came to the memorial service in that little church, overflowing into the auditorium and the choir room and the church house. A church family that could never be separated, even by death. Nothing can separate us from the love God has for each one of us, or from the love we have for each other.

And in the midst of that profound moment of sorrow, from deep within my soul, came an overwhelming, if a broken, Hallelujah. Not unlike the holy and the broken Hallelujah of this congregation, as we together walked through those dark days of early September 2001 when we lost so many of our own.

So when we sing our Hallelujah’s, whether at Christmas or at Easter, at our moments of deepest shadow, or today on the 22nd Sunday of Pentecost, we know our God is with us, present and active, loving and eternal, filling our lives with joy. Even in unavoidable suffering, our voices rise together in our holy and our broken Hallelujah!

One more funny story to leave you with today: A man bought a donkey from a preacher. The preacher told the man that this donkey had been trained in a very unique way, being the donkey of a preacher. The only way to make the donkey move is to say, "Hallelujah!" The only way to make the donkey stop is to say, "Amen!" The man was pleased with his purchase and immediately got on the donkey to try out the preacher's instructions. "Hallelujah!" shouted the man. The donkey began to trot. "Amen!" shouted the man. The donkey stopped immediately. "This is great!" said the man. And with a "Hallelujah," he rode off.

The man traveled for a long time without stopping, through most of the day and into the evening, through some steep mountains. Soon he was heading towards a cliff, a sharp drop. And for love nor money, he could not remember the word to make the donkey stop. "Stop," said the man. "Halt!" he cried. The donkey just kept going.

"Oh, no," he thought in panic. And he started to go through any and every religious word he could think of. "Bible! Church! Father! Son! Holy Ghost! Please Stop!!!" shouted the man. The donkey just began to trot faster. He was getting closer and closer to the cliff edge.

Finally, in desperation, the man said a prayer: "Please, dear Lord. Please make this donkey stop before I go off the end of this mountain. In Jesus name, AMEN." The donkey came to an abrupt stop, just one step from the edge of the cliff. Relieved with such a close call, and not thinking, the man blurted out his heartfelt joy: "HALLELUJAH!"

A bit earlier, we sang some of Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah." Originally 15 verses, Cohen actually wrote 80 verses over the years. The final verse brings it all home,

[singing]

And even though it all went wrong,
I'll stand before the Lord of Song
With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah.

Hallelujah.

Hallelujah.

Hallelujah.

Hallelujah.

AMEN.

©2018 Mark D. Hostetter