

## **December 10, 2017 – Truth that Lives**

### **Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13**

When I was a student minister, I served for 10 months in the Marengo Pastoral Charge and lived in Alsask, SK. I was just two months into my internship when I was invited to take part in the Remembrance Day service at the local composite school. I stood on the stage and talked to the students about the importance of understanding our neighbours, of attempting to walk in the shoes of those who are different from us. When I opened my reflection to comments, one of older students, sitting in the back row of the auditorium, shouted out, “Isn’t it true that religion itself has been the cause of many wars?” There I stood, a representative of a local religious organization and all I could do was acknowledge the truth of that statement. Wars have been fought for thousands of years, and continue to be fought because of doctrine, creed and the belief that there is only one way to eternal truth.

This was true in the time of the Hebrew Scriptures when King David fought for the supremacy of the Israelite nation, for the glory of their one God. This was true in the middle ages during The Crusades when the Christians of Europe tried to retake control of Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the Muslims. And this is still true today. The news this week was filled with stories of escalating violence in Israel and Palestine as the people of the Middle East reacted to the U.S. President’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, Jerusalem, a key religious centre for three of the world’s major religions.

The deep chasm of fear and anger between Judaism and Islam and between Islam and Christianity has just been deepened, yet again. The depth of this chasm and the pain that it can create is evident in both of today's readings. In the psalm we hear the Hebrew people lamenting the state of their war-torn homeland and pleading with their God to "revive us again." And in Leonard Cohen's song, *Nevermind*, we hear the pain of a war lost and a people destroyed:

Your victory  
Was so complete  
That some among you  
Thought to keep

A record of  
Our little lives  
The clothes we wore  
Our spoons our knives

The games of luck  
Our soldiers played  
The stones we cut  
The songs we made

Like all of Cohen's writing, this poem – turned into a song – is incredibly complex and has a myriad of possible interpretations. But I'd like to focus on one of the themes that I see moving through this piece of literature. That is the theme of truth. It shows up in various ways and in various places. Near the beginning we hear:

The story's told  
With facts and lies  
I had a name  
But never mind

Never mind  
Never mind  
The war was lost  
The treaty signed

There's truth that lives  
And truth that dies  
I don't know which  
So never mind

These words are filled with despair and hopelessness. Even the name of the song, *Nevermind*, can be interpreted that way... everything is so corrupt that it just doesn't matter anymore. The truth is so unclear, so messed up, that we might as well just let go of any thought of healing or of new life – just nevermind.

But Cohen doesn't leave it there. This song of devastation and loss has within it a song of peace. Those words that you didn't understand, the ones that showed up on the screens in a strange script, were Arabic. The woman's voice, which soared like an angel over Cohen's drone, was chanting "Salaam, Salaam" or "Peace, Peace." Arabic is, of course, the language of most of the Muslim population in the Middle East.

I think in order to understand this song we need to explore Leonard Cohen's religious life. He grew up Jewish and continued to practice the Jewish Sabbath throughout his life. But at the same time, Cohen was also an ordained Zen Buddhist monk. During the 1990's he spent five years in seclusion in a monastery outside of Los Angeles. Cohen also stated at one point, "I'm very fond of Jesus Christ. ...Any guy who says 'Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the meek' has got to be a figure of unparalleled generosity and insight and madness... I'm not trying to alter the Jewish view of Jesus Christ. But to me, in spite of what I know about the history of legal Christianity, the figure of the man has touched me." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard\\_Cohen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard_Cohen)

Cohen understood that there are many paths to the same truth and that truth is real no matter who speaks it. Through his Buddhist practice he knew that truth is most often found within, and that it is centred in the sacred. In his song, Leonard Cohen went on to write:

I live the life  
I left behind

I live it full  
I live it wide  
Through layers of time  
You can't divide

My woman's here  
My children too  
Their graves are safe  
From ghosts like you

In places deep  
With roots entwined  
I live the life I left behind

No matter what horrors this man may have experienced in the midst of war, no matter what horrors this man may have committed in the midst of war, no matter what horrors may still live on in this man's memories, his essence is not gone. He can still say, "In places deep, with roots entwined, I live the life I left behind. " It is in those deep places, that he is still able to access peace and love. In this interpretation, the title, *Nevermind*, becomes the mantra, "Nevermind, nevermind, It's OK, it's OK," in spite of everything, truth lives on in me.

The real truth, the truth that lives, is the truth of love and compassion, in other words it is the Holy Mystery: God, Allah, Yahweh, or in the language of our First Nations brothers and sisters, Kisemanito. As the psalmist wrote: "Let me hear

what you will say, O God, for you will speak peace to your people, to the faithful who turn their hearts to you.” Whether the faithful are Jewish or Muslim, Christian or Buddhist, First Nations or Hindu, the truth that lives is still the same. It is the truth of love and compassion. It is the truth of justice and peace.

I’m sure that Leonard Cohen would have agreed with Martin Luther King, Jr: when he said,

If we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective.

I love the fact that these words come from “A Christmas Sermon on Peace,” that King preached December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1967. World peace will only be possible when creed and doctrine get out of the way and everyone recognizes the truth that lives.