

## December 17, 2017 – A Broken Hallelujah

### Psalm 126

When my sister Colette came to visit me in November, we attended a performance of Charles Dicken's *A Christmas Carol* at the Globe Theatre. It was a fabulous theatrical performance and we were thoroughly entertained. Like most of you I've read this story and I've watched many different versions on television over the years. I think my favourite is still, *Scrooge*, the classic 1951 movie with Alistair Sims in the title role.

In this story, Ebenezer Scrooge owns his own business and has more money than anyone could possibly need. He has no worries about food or clothing or where he's going to sleep. It seems that Scrooge has all the things that he needs in order to be happy; but he's not. He is miserable. He is self-centred and miserly and lives a lonely, solitary life. It's as if Scrooge has created his own joyless prison and then thrown away the key.

Prisons come in many shapes and sizes. Some of them we create for ourselves, some of them are created for us. In the Bible we read about the Israelites who lost a war and then lived in exile in Babylon for many years. While they lived in captivity far away from their beloved Jerusalem, the city of Zion, they lamented. They lamented their fate and remembered the glory years when David was their warrior King and their nation's wealth and power was constantly growing.

This is the same David that Leonard Cohen names in the first verse of his song, *Hallelujah*.

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

Like Cohen, King David was a poet and a songwriter; he played the harp and wrote many of the psalms. But Cohen recognized that this famous musician and king was also a confused and flawed human being just like you and me. Leonard Cohen concluded the first verse of his song with the words:

The minor fall, the major lift  
The baffled king composing Hallelujah

King David may have been rich and powerful, but like Scrooge he was not happy with what he had. In the second verse Cohen refers to the time when David saw Bathsheba, another's man's wife, bathing on a roof and sent men to get her so that he could seduce or possibly even rape her:

Well your faith was strong but you needed proof  
You saw her bathing on the roof  
Her beauty and the moonlight overthrew you

Then it seems as if Cohen is attempting to shift some of the blame for this seduction onto the woman by bringing in images from a totally different Biblical story, the story of Samson and Delilah:

Well she tied you to her kitchen chair  
She broke your throne, and she cut your hair  
And from your lips she drew Hallelujah

Of course, in the actual story of David and Bathsheba, the king orchestrates the death of Bathsheba's husband so that he can marry her and claim her children. In the biblical story, King David's crimes escalated from adultery to murder.

But Cohen, in his song, then moves past these ancient images of infidelity and betrayal and brings us into the present tense.

I've seen your flag on the marble arch  
Our love is not a victory march  
It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah

These images seem to connect love in relationships to acts of violence and war:

Maybe there's a God above  
But all I have ever learned from love  
Was how to shoot somebody who outdrew ya

There are so many ways that this song can be interpreted, but I believe Cohen is telling us that love and life are hard. Often our relationships are broken.

Sometimes we even use our sexuality, our most intimate connections with each other, as a weapon, as a way to cause pain and heartache. And it would be easy to allow the pain of past infidelities, betrayals and broken relationships to become a prison of fear and distrust. It would be easy to close ourselves off from the possibility of joy in our lives.

But Cohen's song is filled with the Hebrew word, Hallelujah. This word literally means, "God be praised." Hallelujah is an expression of gratitude, of rejoicing. In a song filled with disillusionment and pain, the writer expresses thankfulness and praise. In order to explain this contradiction, Cohen once wrote, "I wanted to

stand with those who clearly see G-d's holy broken world for what it is, and still find the courage or the heart to praise it.”

Life and love can be hard. When we are lucky and things are going well, then we may experience periods of happiness, times when our load is light and our way is clear. Our happiness tends to be connected to the circumstances in our lives. But joyfulness, the ability to rejoice is something totally different. Joy is deeply connected to Spirit and to gratitude (Brene Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, pages 77-81).

In *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge had his eyes opened by the three ghosts who showed him scenes from the past, the present and a possible future. After these visits Scrooge was able to feel gratitude for what he had and to express his gratitude through benevolence to others. It was through his gratitude and his giving, that Ebenezer experienced real joy. When he found the key that opened his heart, Scrooge was able to escape the joyless prison that he had created for himself.

The Israelites practiced gratitude through their psalms. Even as they pleaded with God to rebuild their demolished cities they sang,

Truly God has done great things for us,  
and therefore we rejoice.

Even as they surveyed the destruction of their beloved Jerusalem, they gave thanks that they had been released from captivity in Babylon and were home in Zion.

Our mouths were full of laughter,  
and our tongues uttered shouts of joy.

As we move through Advent towards the season of Christmas, may we open our hearts to the gifts that we have already been given and know the joy that freedom can bring. May we feel gratitude for life itself and for the promise of new life that comes with the birth of the baby Jesus. May we know the presence of the Holy Mystery and the comfort of the essence of love so that we too can sing our broken Hallelujahs!