

The Power of a Broken Hallelujah

Easter 2016, March 27

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

Anthem: *Their sound is gone out into all lands* (G.F. Handel)

“Their sound is gone out into all lands.”

It makes me want to start out this morning where I usually end up: Today – especially today – if you hear that voice -- if you hear that “Hallelujah” ringing somewhere out in the world or whispered deep down in the depths of your own soul – well, do not harden your hearts.

But I think I should remind you that there is no straight shot from the Hosannas of last Sunday and the Hallelujahs of this one. That trajectory is broken up by Good Friday. Before there were these seven Hallelujahs there was the violence and the brokenness and the disappointment of the seven last words from the cross.

So what we have come to celebrate this morning is not the Hallelujah Chorus of my childhood. Some of you may know that one ...

Hallelu ... Hallelu ... Hallelu ... Hallelujah

Praise ye the Lord!

And this was brilliant for Sunday School because we would divide up the Hallelus and the Praise-ye-the-Lords and you would have to stand up when you sang your part. It was a combination of Christian teaching and calisthenics that tried to harness some of that youthful energy on a Sunday morning.

However, in the trajectory of my own life between the Hallelujah Chorus of my childhood and the Hallelujah Chorus we will sing together moments from now, there have been a lot of Good Fridays. There has been much brokenness and more betrayal – my own and the betrayal of

others – than I care to admit. There have been dashed hopes and nagging disappointments and death.

So if we want our Hallelujah Chorus this morning to be something more than a Sunday School song – something a little deeper than energy hyped up on too much sugar – I think we have to recognize that, if we have anything to celebrate this Easter morning, it is the power of what Leonard Cohen calls, “a broken hallelujah.”

Patrick Green told us the story last week about the choir going out to sing at a facility for incarcerated youth – children 13-18. One of the young people there wanted to sing Cohen’s song about a cold and a broken hallelujah. And as that young person got to the chorus, the choir began to sing along – quiet, supporting the sound of that voice with their own voices, urging that young person on. It was a powerful moment.

And it’s not the first time I have seen this power at work.

But that is Aaron Burkhalter’s story to tell ...

[written and spoken by Aaron]

To me, the broken hallelujah in Leonard Cohen’s song is a "hallelujah that some consider wrong, or improper, but still true. It’s not doctrine. It’s not canonical. It’s not appropriate. It’s not “church.” But it is exactly the kind I’m always searching for now. Faith not dressed up, cleaned up and proper, but real, honest and broken.

I experienced a literal “broken hallelujah” with you all on Dec. 31, 2014. Megan, Norah and I were just starting to attend Seattle First Baptist, there was a New Year’s Celebration and an opportunity to sing some music. Standing before the group with my guitar, ready to sing “Hallelujah,” I realized how few of you I had even met, and I felt like a stranger in this community. I completely forgot verse three and fidgeted in front you trying to remember the words, but someone said “It’s okay! Why don’t you sing the second verse again.”

As I sang the chorus, everyone started to sing with me. Quietly at first, but then louder. It wasn't proper, in the strictest sense, to forget the lyrics, sing the second verse twice in a row. But it was good. I hardly knew any of you before that song, but got to know many of you immediately afterward. And suddenly, we were in a community. Hallelujah.

It's the power of a broken hallelujah that brought Aaron and Megan and Norah home to us.

Now as someone who spends a lot of time with the Bible, I think I have to tell you that, actually, there were no Hallelujahs on that first Easter morning. As Atit told the story, what there was that morning was fear, doubt, conspiracy, disappointment, brokenness. Eventually, there was joy and confidence and a new beginning. But not Hallelujah.

In fact, there aren't any specific Hallelujahs in the New Testament until we get to the very last book of the Bible – that weird, strange, misused poem full of frightening images we call the book of “Revelation.”

Someone who has studied the music of *Messiah* and the book of Revelation says that “A good rule of thumb ... for reading Revelation is: *visualize, don't analyze.*”

But even then, if one wants to see the Hallelujah Chorus in the book of Revelation, one has to visualize a broken one. There is mass destruction and suffering and oppressive governments and complicit religion. It's the last place, in other words, you think you would find a Hallelujah.

But it's there. It's in this vision of people from every language and tribe and nation eating together and singing together and imagining a brand new world together.

When I was in college I spent a summer working on a kibbutz. I went with a group of Baptist students and each one of us was assigned a

family while we were there. My family was a very short, round, opinionated little woman named “Malka” which, in Hebrew, means “Queen.”

Once a week I would go to visit Malka and she would feed me – cookies, or a little cake, or what she called “pizza” which was toast with some cheese and a sliced tomato on top.

Malka was amazing. She spoke seven languages and her English, while it was heavily accented, was clear and straightforward.

And I learned enough about her to know that she had a rough life. She escaped Poland; joined a British military unit during WWII in Egypt; moved to Israel; lost her husband and now lived alone with no children in her small apartment on the kibbutz. She was tired of all the violence and she wanted there to be peace between Israel and the Palestinians. But she had watched as one chance for peace after another came and went.

One day when I arrived, Malka said she had something special planned for us. She handed me “pizza” and told me to sit down. And then she pulled out an old 78 LP. I was a little shocked at first because the album we were going to listen to together was George Frederick Handel’s *Messiah*. We sat there together in silence while the music played.

And when we got to the Hallelujah Chorus, she closed her eyes, and leaned her head back, and quietly began to sing along.

Here we were – a young American Baptist college kid with more brokenness on its way than I could have ever imagined and an aging Israeli Jewish woman living with as much brokenness as anyone should ever be asked to bear, humming together, moving together, caught up together in that great chorus of Hallelujah.

In that moment I could see the power of a broken hallelujah. I could visualize, I could imagine, people of every language, tribe, and nation, out of whatever brokenness they might experience, eating together and moving together and being caught up together in that one great chorus of Hallelujah.

That's the Easter Hallelujah we have come to celebrate this morning because resurrection is not resuscitation. It's not bringing something back to life. It's not going back to a time before there was brokenness or to a place we imagine that was safe and comfortable and familiar. It's not trying to recapture that Hallelujah Chorus of our childhood.

Resurrection is what happens when we stand together in our brokenness and imagine a new life and a new world.

It's that incarcerated young person who wants to sing a broken hallelujah and we can't help but sing along.

It's the young man standing up to sing and messing up the words. It's a voice in the crowd saying, "It's okay; go on," and all those other voices joining in. It's about standing up alone and discovering that you belong.

It's the young American college kid and the aging Israeli Jewish woman caught up together in the vision of a new kind of world.

It's an Easter morning when a congregation stands together to claim that the kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of another kind of power – one that gathers up all the broken into one great chorus of Hallelujah.

We are that congregation this morning. So I invite you to stand as you are able and, if you want to come sing with the choir, you can make your way forward. There are larger music scores available for you here. Those who want to remain where you are, you have the music as well.

One of the earliest music critics to hear Handel's *Messiah* in the 1700s wrote that the music gave him "the idea of Heaven ... [as a place] where everybody is to sing whether they have voices or not."

So do sing or hum or move or something. Don't worry about messing up because, after all, we are celebrating the power of a broken hallelujah.

So we stand and sing this morning: Hallelujah!

NOTES

Carol M. Bechtel has written, *Hallelujah: the Bible and Handel's Messiah*, a study of the biblical texts and the music. (The Kerygma Program, 1995). For the quotes here see pp. 96 & 95. While not used here, Liel Leibovitz has written, *A Broken Hallelujah: Rock and Roll, Redemption, and the life of Leonard Cohen* (W.W. Norton and Company, 2014).