



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
 Asheville, North Carolina
 3 July 2022
 Sermon: Joy in the Morning
 Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Psalm 30

Psalm 30 (NRSV)

¹ I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up
 and did not let my foes rejoice over me.
² O Lord my God, I cried to you for help,
 and you have healed me.
³ O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol,
 restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.
⁴ Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones,
 and give thanks to his holy name.
⁵ For his anger is but for a moment;
 his favor is for a lifetime.
 Weeping may linger for the night,
 but joy comes with the morning.
⁶ As for me, I said in my prosperity,
 "I shall never be moved."
⁷ By your favor, O Lord,
 you had established me as a strong mountain;
 you hid your face;
 I was dismayed.
⁸ To you, O Lord, I cried,
 and to the Lord I made supplication:
⁹ "What profit is there in my death,
 if I go down to the Pit?
 Will the dust praise you?
 Will it tell of your faithfulness?
¹⁰ Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me!
 O Lord, be my helper!"
¹¹ You have turned my mourning into dancing;
 you have taken off my sackcloth
 and clothed me with joy,
¹² so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
 O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

(singing)

Hallelujah, Hallelujah
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

I did that for two reasons: (1) hopefully it will help some of you recognize the song I'm about to talk about and (2) to see the look on Jeff Jones's face. Still not ready for the choir, am I Jeff? I'll keep working on it.

I follow several Presbyterian leaders' groups on Facebook. In one of those groups, in a Facebook post, a Presbyterian minister, whom I do not know, lamented the fact that a family in his church wanted Leonard Cohen's famous song "Hallelujah" sung at a loved one's funeral. The pastor wrote something to the effect that the song was all a bunch of garbled, meaningless lyrics about a relationship with a few superficial references to the Bible thrown in.

So, I read that, and, I had pause, and remind myself that it's not productive for ministers to argue with each other over Facebook. As you can imagine, I've had to learn that lesson too many times. But I was frustrated with his poor understanding of the song. In reality, the themes of Cohen's "Hallelujah" echo the theology of the Psalms in Hebrew Scripture, and they remain central to the life of faith today.

Just listen to the lyrics from a few of the song's stanzas (Don't worry Jeff, I'm just going to read them):

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?
It goes like this, the 4th, the 5th,
The minor fall, the major lift,
The baffled king composing hallelujah.

Hallelujah.

I've been here before
I know this room, I've walked this floor
I used to live alone before I knew you
And 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.

Maybe there's a God above
 But all I've ever learned from love
 Was how to shoot at someone who outdrew you
 And it's not a cry that you hear at night
 It's not somebody who's seen the light
 It's a cold and it's a broken hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah
 Hallelujah, Hallelujah¹

One commenter describes Cohen as, “raised in Judaism by parents who told him he was a direct descendent of the high priest Aaron...also an ordained Zen monk, an appreciator of Christianity and Gnosticism, and a reader of Hindu philosophy.”² “Hallelujah,” itself, is a term of praise, literally in Hebrew “Praise the Lord.” In this song, Cohen is juxtaposing praise with anguish; worship with brokenness. “Love is not a victory march,” he says, “And it’s not a cry that you hear at night / It's not somebody who's seen the light / It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah.”

He’s saying that love isn’t about triumph. It’s not about winning. Love doesn’t appear or express itself only when life is perfect. Love is about that which remains even in the imperfections of life, the highs and the lows of relationships. Love appears even alongside the pains we live with. It’s a cold and it’s a broken Hallelujah. ‘Praise the Lord.’

This is precisely the theology of the Psalms, including Psalm 30, this beautiful and popular Psalm of Praise for today: “I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me.”

If you look closely at the movement of Psalm 30, you see the tensions that it is living within between pain and praise. Over and over:

- “I will extol you, O Lord” (v1)
- But: (v.7) “You hid your face; I was dismayed.”

¹ Leonard Cohen, “Hallelujah,” <https://youtu.be/YrLk4vdY28Q>.

² Paul DeCamp, “The Broken Grace of Leonard Cohen,” University of Chicago Divinity School, April 13, 2017, <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/articles/broken-grace-leonard-cohen>

- (v.4) “Sing praises to the Lord, O you God’s faithful ones, and give thanks to God’s holy name”
- But (v.9-10) “What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness? Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!”

There is a constant juxtaposition throughout the Psalm of praising God and crying out to God, one right next to the other; the Psalmist expresses praise and pain in the same breath. Remember its most famous line, v.5: “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” A cold and broken Hallelujah.

We see this pattern over and over in the Psalms:

Psalm 42, praise in v. 1: “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.” But then pain in v. 9, “I say to God, my rock, ‘Why have you forgotten me?’”

Psalm 119, praise in v. 105: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” But earlier, v. 25 “my soul clings to the dust.” V. 28 “My soul melts away for sorrow.”

There’s Psalm 22, quoted by Jesus on the cross, some of the most painful words spoken in the NT: “My God, my God why have you forsaken me? (v1). And then praise just two verses later, the Psalmist nonetheless declares, “Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.”

And who could forget the most famous line in the Psalms, Psalm 23, v.4 “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me” – there it is again, pain and praise in the same breath.

Our text today promises “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning,” and for too long I have taken that to mean I must wait until things are all right in this world to rejoice and have joy in God. If we wait until all is right, we will never get to rejoicing. We will never get to joy. We will never get to praise. If we simply wait, we will miss the whole point of the Psalms.

As a pastor, I feel sometimes like I’ve been holding my breath ever since March of 2020.

Watching the congressional hearings this week, I realized that I've been holding my breath ever since January 6, 2021, just wondering if America's institutions will hold.

And every year, around the 4th of July, when we celebrate the ideals of liberty and independence in this country, I think of communities who have been waiting through the generations.

This week, I read again Langston Hughes' famous poem, "Let America Be America Again." Do you remember what he says in that poem? The Harlem Renaissance poet's constant refrain: "America was never America to me."³

Or, again around this time of year, when I hear Frederick Douglas's famous speech, "What to a Slave is the Fourth of July?"⁴ I'm reminded of generations of dreams deferred, generations pushed off to the margins, generations waiting and fighting for those ideals to be realities for all.

But the cries and petitions and protests of people of faith throughout history, have always been held alongside the joy of worship, the praise of the community. Because praise and joy do not wait upon perfection.

Rather, like the Psalmist, we hold these things together, praise and pain, joy and protest. Protest does not exclude joy. Pain does not render praise frivolous. Our ancestors of the faith held these too together intimately, in the promise that God travels with us in pain, in the joy that the Holy Spirit amplifies our protest.

So, if you come here, to this service of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, on this 3rd day of July, 2022, and the songs of joy and praise catch in your throat, know that God hears the pain in your song.

And if you come, and you feel the Spirit calling you to dance and to sing, know that this does not negate your passion, and your lament, and your hope, and your prayer to see *more* of God's liberating love in this world. Remember that we can dance *and* we can cry, we can protest *and* we can sing at the same time. Christians have been holding these tensions together for centuries. Because this world is hurting. And this life is also beautiful.

³ Langston Hughes, "Let America Be America Again," <https://poets.org/poem/let-america-be-america-again>

⁴ Frederick Douglas, "What to a Slave is the Fourth of July?" <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july/>

So, with the Psalmist, let us extol the Lord, for God has drawn us up. Let us sing praises to the Lord, and give thanks to God's holy name. Let us proclaim that joy comes in the morning.

Because we live by a promise that is written on our hearts: that the creating God of grace and truth, the sustaining God of love and liberation, travels with us through this life. And for that, with joyful hearts, we say, Thanks Be to God.