

THE HOLY AND THE BROKEN
Sermon by Tracy Sprowls
Sunday, July 21, 2019
All Souls Church, New York City

I should have known better. With a name like “Going to the Sun Road” you would think I might have guessed what was coming. But no. I excitedly enjoyed the mountains, trees, and waterfalls in panoramic display around me while failing to notice we were climbing up. Up. And up. Until it was too late. There was no turning back, no way to go back in time and plan a different route.

Because General Assembly, the annual meeting of the Unitarian Universalists Association, was in Spokane, Washington this year, I figured why not plan a family vacation in nearby Glacier National Park for the following week. Part of the trip would include driving on the Going to the Sun Road as we made our way from Missoula, Montana to Waterton Village, in Alberta, Canada. What a fun name for a road, right? Everyone who has talked or written about Glacier has said it was a *must do* if you visited. And how exciting, that the snow could keep the road closed into early July.

So there we were, my husband, son, and I, in a rented Durango, on the Going to the Sun Road only 2 days after the whole road was opened, beginning the 50 mile journey that, for me, was a terrifying nightmare and simultaneously a trip through one of the most breathtakingly beautiful places I have ever been. The road is a 2-lane highway (although, frankly, highway is a misnomer) spanning the width of the park and crossing the continental divide at Logan’s Pass, a mere 6,646 feet above sea level. Driving through the park on this road one will see glacial lakes sparkling turquoise in the sun, glaciers for which the park gets its name, cedar forests, and alpine tundra. If you are lucky you will see mountain goats, big horn sheep, moose, or even a bear. If you can keep your eyes unclenched, that is. A significant part of the road has mountains going up on one side, occasionally opening to waterfalls while on the other side, there are mountains as far as one can see and a sheer several thousand-foot drop. There are very few guard rails and several very sharp turns and lots of cars and buses, yes, 21-foot-long red tour busses, driving on the road with you or pulling in and out of the many pull-outs or viewpoints.

The road is an engineering marvel and at the same time a journey through a certain kind of acrophobic hell.

We drove through this terrifying paradise like this: David with his eyes on the road and his hands white-fisting the steering wheel. Me watching David to make sure he was keeping us safe and also occasionally peeking out the window at the view. And my 24-year-old son, Izaac, with his head out the window like a puppy, gloriously taking in everything. As we came down off the more challenging part of the road into safer territory and surer footing, David sighed with relief while my own relief sounded more like a groan and a mumbled hallelujah.

The word *hallelujah* is a word of praise as well as a word of relief. Leonard Cohen, the Canadian songwriter and poet who wrote the song *Hallelujah* that we have heard several versions of this morning wrote that, “... many kinds of hallelujahs do exist. I say all the perfect and broken hallelujahs have an equal value...”

Hallelujah is the perfect word for life, for the experience at Glacier, but also our daily living. Being alive, well, brings us beauty and fear. Good things happen in the midst of bad; bad in the midst of good. There are children in cages and powerful racists in the white house and yet the

sun rises in brilliant beauty and babies smile precious toothless grins and dolphins swim off the coast. Sorrow and joy, goodness and hate, love and ugliness exist together. In the words of spiritual writer Anne Lamott, “Being alive here on earth has always been a mixed grill at best, lovely, hard, and confusing... (but) Eden explodes and we enter a dangerous, terrifying world, the same place where goodness, love, and kind intelligence lift us so often. The world has an awful beauty. This is a chaotic place, humanity is a chaotic place, and (each person) a chaotic place.”

This is why Cohen’s song has such a depth of emotional impact. It speaks to human existence in the glory and triumph as well as the misery and despair. It speaks to the whole human condition and to the heart of one soul.

The song, *Hallelujah*, with the title, its chorus, repeated four times, connects the listener to emotions that go back through time to the earliest utterance of this word of praise, used in the Hebrew text 24 times. Rufus Wainright, the musician, described the song as having, “deep, deep roots in the human psyche... (so it relates) a lot to different situations, whether it’s about war, about peace or love or hate or whatever; it’s this unifying expression of human existence, in a weird way—hallelujah—it’s just life, in a sense.”

Hallelujah has become one of the most loved and most performed musical compositions in the modern era of songwriting. “Hallelujah has been performed and recorded by hundreds of artists—from U2 to Justin Timberlake, from Bon Jovi to Celine Dion, from Willie Nelson to numerous contestants on American Idol. It has been sung by opera stars and punk bands.” There are musical renditions played with ukulele, violin, piano, cello, fiddle, and harmonium. “Decades after its creation, it became a Top Ten hit throughout Europe. In 2008, different versions simultaneously held the Number One and Number Two positions on the UK singles chart, with Cohen’s original climbing into the Top 40 at the same time...It made the list of *Rolling Stone’s* 500 Greatest Songs of All Time, and, in a poll of songwriters by the British music magazine *Q*, was named one of the Top Ten Greatest Tracks of all time, alongside the likes of “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “Born to Run,” and “Strawberry Fields Forever...” Somewhere along the way, “Hallelujah” reached the kind of rarefied status that only a handful of contemporary songs like “Imagine” and “A Change Is Gonna Come” have achieved...” Both Bono from U2 and John Legend, and surely others, have described the song as “the most perfect song in the world.” (Light)

The song is about life. It is about human existence, yes. But it is also open to your own interpretation. It is what you are feeling or living or bring to it. Feeling hopeful and triumphant? Listen to k.d lang’s version from the 2010 Olympics. Grieving or lonely, try Rufus Wainright’s, the version that was in *Shrek*. Perhaps feeling frisky and amorous? Jeff Buckley’s version for sure. Responding to a natural disaster with confusion and pain, listen to Justin Timberlake’s broken *Hallelujah*. In the hundreds of versions out there, I am particularly fond of the one by artist Jai Jagdeesh. With sitar and harmonium and her lovely voice, she taps into the spiritual, the mystery, the love that is the grounding of all. (You can listen and watch her version here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ud-TDhCrSsk>)

The song is an earworm, I know. You may be singing it for days and if you feel the need to send an angry email to me, that is okay. But this is what I mean to say to you today. The word *hallelujah* is necessary. The world is a mess. Sometimes we are a mess.

Life can be like a ride through Glacier National Park. Beautiful and terrifying. Sometimes it is more one than the other. We are witness and party to evil things happening in this country and

around the world. There are four women of color in Congress recently verbally assaulted by the President of the United States. And, there are four powerful women of color in Congress who are speaking truth in the face of ugly racism and injustice. There are children in cages. There are protests everyday calling out this moral failure. There is great suffering. We struggle in our own private ways.

And yet goodness and beauty abound. *Hallelujah* helps us accept that life is marbled with both the good and the bad, great love and kindness and the worst that we can do to each other. We are broken and yet we are holy. The point, a wise person once said, is not to stay alive but to stay in love. This is hallelujah. Through the brokenness there is the ability to love, to forgive, to offer mercy.

Anne Lamott writes in her book *Hallelujah Anyway*:

In 2015, nine people were slaughtered at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and their relatives spoke forgiveness. In the 1990s in South Africa, during the hearings by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a woman confronted the man who had burned her husband and son in front of her. She was asked what his punishment should be.

She said she wanted him in prison forever, not put to death, and she wanted to adopt him, so she could give him all the love she could no longer give her husband and son.

She let herself out of jail. The same is true of teenage Tibetan nuns tortured in prison who prayed for their Chinese guards, held them with mercy because they could see that the guards had created lives of suffering for themselves. This is not pity as if “they” are separate and different, but as if they are “us,” and share our human lot. The Amish community in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, reached out to the widow of the man who killed five of their schoolgirls in 2006, so she could be included in the circle of mourning and comfort.

Hallelujah. Love is beyond all things. Kindness mends the broken places like gold on a Japanese pot. The cracks are how the light gets in anyway (Cohen). Hallelujah. Forgiveness and mercy are not out of reach. This too shall pass, hallelujah. The universal power and emotion of the word *hallelujah* reminds us no one is powerless in the face of chaos and corruption and the abuse of power. The moral arc of the universe bends towards justice, with our help, hallelujah. Hallelujah, hallelujah.

Leonard Cohen said about his song, “This world is full of conflicts and full of things that cannot be reconciled but there are moments when we can transcend the dualistic system and reconcile and embrace the whole mess, and that’s what I mean by ‘Hallelujah.’ That regardless of what the impossibility of the situation is, there is a moment when you open your mouth and you throw open your arms and you embrace the thing and you just say, Hallelujah!”

After our ride on the Going to the Sun Road, we spent a few days in the northern part glacier national park, in Canada. But then, insanely, in the face of fear, and necessarily, in the presence of such awe and beauty we did the same road again, this time in one of those 21 foot red tour buses. How could we not do so when faced with the impossible beauty of the situation? We embraced the fear and our hearts sang hallelujah.

Life is the mess and the beauty, both. In this space and in others that allow us to embrace our whole selves may we find our voices. May we walk in beauty. May we rise and rise again until all know more good, more love. May we let go of the clinging grasp to those things that make us hurt, angry, fearful, isolated, critical, disconnected, or hateful. May we walk with our arms wide open offering compassion and mercy to all, including ourselves. May our hands be opened to serve, to hold, to heal. May our hearts be open in the face of it all.

Amen and hallelujah.

Hallelujah and amen.

The book I relied on for information about the song, *Hallelujah*, is called *The Holy or the Broken* by Alan Light.

And the other book I reference is *Hallelujah Anyway* by Anne Lamott

Some other great versions of *Hallelujah*:

Hillary Clinton (Kate McKinnon) performs Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah on SNL.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BG-ZDrypec>

Lindsay Stirling- violin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VzprYCxPBO>

Jake Shimabukuro - Hallelujah

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5mIUahwZjo>

Trace Bundy - Fingerstyle Guitar & Violin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6mP122gbO4>

2cellos

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3649dq6boA>

kd lang- 2010 Olympics

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oZN2eTgvVs>