

For the Journey

April 25/24 - Rev. Dave Crawford

Friends, I'm using an old sermon this week as a "For the Journey" reflection. A bit of a time management crunch has led me to do so. I guess it's about seven years old so a few things may be a bit dated. Blessings.



“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.” - Matthew 16:13-20.

“Who is He?”

Any Leonard Cohen fans here today? I was surprised a few years ago when my mother shared with me that she was a big fan and would be delighted to receive one of his cds for Christmas. I was surprised I guess, because I thought I knew everything about my Mom, which of course I didn't, and still don't. That was a bit of a lesson for me... I'll confess, a much needed lesson. I'll also confess that I've never really paid too much attention to Cohen myself. In fact, it wasn't until the resurrection of his song “Hallelujah” about 8 or 9 years ago that I really sort of came to understand his importance as a Canadian artist.

Cohen died last year. It was a significant loss for Canada. Did you know “Hallelujah” was written in 1984, released on an album of his that year? Did you know it originally had 80 verses, later reduced to 15? Cohen once told his buddy, Bob Dylan, that it took him two years to write “Hallelujah”. I've been thinking lately about that song Hallelujah, which has become a sort of secular anthem in Canada over the past decade. You hear it sung at weddings but also funerals, Sunday morning church services but also Canada Day concerts. A great piece of music from a great Canadian artist. But frankly, I don't get it, I mean the lyrics. The tune is nice, a bit long perhaps, but I can't figure out what the song means. It's somewhat frustrating for me because I'd like to know what it means, since the title of the song is a word that has great significance for me, and a lot of other Christians, and Jews. I know what the word Hallelujah means, a Hebrew word, from Scripture, the Psalms, literally “Praise ye yah”, which is short for Yahweh, so basically - “Praise God”. But the song itself, always sung with such a high level of emotion, it's beyond me. According to the Internet, Cohen once commented on the song's meaning by stating: *“It explains that many kinds of hallelujahs do exist, and all the perfect and broken hallelujahs have equal value.”* I still don't get it.

I do wonder, however, and this may be a long shot, but I wonder if the song's popularity is due in part to the fact that that very word, “Hallelujah”, is the title? I wonder if in our increasingly secular culture there isn't still a sort of religious or spiritual nostalgia at work here, lingering in the Canadian psyche, a hearkening back to a former time when terms like Hallelujah had a certain credence within our common language, the only difference now being that the credence comes not from religion, not from the Church, but from secularism itself? Thus, in a way, what was once a word with religious cultural significance is now, through Leonard Cohen, an adopted or redefined word and song, its significance coming from the very fact that its creator was one of the prophets of Canadian secular spirituality. Or maybe it's just a nice tune.

Perhaps no crystal clear answers are available but consider this: is it possible the same phenomenon has happened with the word, the name - Jesus? In other words, that the culture - the secular, non-church culture - has taken ownership of that sacred name and in some cases reshaped and redefined it regardless of church teaching on the matter?

Bible scholar Bart Ehrman had to write a book a few years back, titled, "Did Jesus Exist?" because there were so many places and people on the Internet asserting he never did exist. Thus others, non-scholars, non-Christians, have taken on the air of expertise in the study of Jesus, challenging commonly held views. Who has more credibility today when it comes to the topic of Jesus? Pastor/preacher Joel Osteen, whose massive, wealthy, prosperity-gospel church in Houston came under fire his week for dragging its heels in responding to the crisis of Hurricane Harvey? Or author Dan Brown, whose series of "DaVinci Code" novels has attracted thousands of converts? Does the culture listen to Pope Francis, or Deepak Chopra? Reza Azlan? Oprah? To whom does the culture turn for spiritual insights on the "real" Jesus these days? Your local, friendly, neighborhood clergy person? Or popular neo-atheist Richard Dawkins, or now-deceased but still popular atheist journalist Christopher Hitchens? Or maybe the most recent twenty-something blogging sensation, who, for reasons of charisma and perhaps an articulate way of chastising traditional beliefs about Jesus, leads the way in Internet hits, at least for a day?

The diversity of opinions on Jesus in our time is vast, perhaps more than any time in history, limitless: some say he was a prophet, or a healer, a great teacher, a rebel, a revolutionary, a husband to Mary Magdalene, an immigrant to France - whatever!! Yet only in the Church, it seems to me, do we find the claim of divinity somehow attached to Jesus, still, and the question 'Who is Jesus?' seems just as important, perhaps more so, than the question: 'Who was Jesus?'

Even at Hillhurst United Church, cutting edge, relevant, inclusive, successful - if you listen carefully to the liturgy, pay attention to what's happening, worship there still asserts that mysterious notion of Jesus' uniqueness; what we used to describe at seminary as the distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Of course Jesus was well aware of the diversity of opinion in his own time when he had asked his friends that question. He knew the answers before they were given: some say John the Baptist, or the prophet Elijah or some other prophet.

Of greater concern may be how his first disciples and we modern disciples personally answer the question, how we answer it not just verbally, intellectually, with the declaration of some creed, but with the choices we make, the actions we take, in our day-to-day existence, as those who claim to be followers of Jesus. **“But who do you say that I am?”**

Frederick Buechner, many years ago, expressed what might be called the traditional answer when he offered these seemingly crude words, yet words that perhaps still mean something to us: *“What is new about the New Covenant is not the idea that God loves the world enough to bleed for it but the claim that there he is actually putting his money where his mouth is... Like a father saying about his sick child, ‘I’d do anything to make you well’, God finally calls his own bluff and does it... Jesus Christ is what God does.”* How do you respond to that? To Buechner’s assertion? Food for thought, surely?

Twenty years ago when my brother Mark and his wife Desiree named their first child Joshua, I was pleased to share with them that Joshua was a form of the Hebrew name Yeshua, or Jesus. I thought they’d be thrilled with that info but they weren’t, just kind of stunned. Don’t get me wrong - they’re definitely not anti-Christian. Their kids both attended a Christian school in Calgary until High School. No, it was something else. They chose the name Joshua because it was a “Bible” name, and they liked the sound of it. Joshua was o.k., but Jesus? The idea of their son taking on that name was too daunting, in a way. Their reverence for the name Jesus and all that was encompassed in that name was a bit too much to handle. They were taken aback.

And so, friends, perhaps there remains within our culture: a remnant of awe and reverence concerning the name, a sense of largeness attached to that name, perhaps more than we had thought, perhaps more than a secular claiming or redefining of the name.

But who do you say that I am? “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”

Hallelujah indeed.