

Leonard Cohen for Lent

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 25 February 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Lent 2B

**Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16; Gospel: Mark 8:31-38;
Music: "You want it darker" by Leonard Cohen**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Gatherings" tab

From the edges to the heartlands... Lent involves some difficult travel, traversing the challenging places in our understanding of the Sacred and the Self, facing questions we would rather not address. Listening to some dark music.

We seek a blessing such as Abraham sought after following the call of Yahweh to leave behind his kin and his land to go a place where God did not reside. In ancient religion, gods were linked to a particular place, and to the people of that place. Yahweh was calling Abram and Sarai to an unknown place, and so the story expresses a new movement in human theology, a dawning understanding that God – that the Sacred - was not limited by geography. It was to be more than a millennium before a descendent of Sarai and Abraham, from the nowhere town of Nazareth, would claim that neither was God linked to a particular race or nation.

In 2016, near the end of his life, Leonard Cohen released the song: "*You Want it Darker.*" He wrestles with the idea of God just as his Jewish forbearers did before him.

In the face of human violence and suffering he questions the nature of God: God the good and powerful; God the absent and indifferent, or God the callous and cruel. The nature of the holy haunts his final reflection.

If God is good and powerful, as we are told, why does suffering persist? Cohen does not question God's power, but he rages against God's unwillingness to address suffering. Like the Psalmist, he challenges God to be God.

Cohen did not go gently into that good night. There is no making peace with God here.

In the gospel reading, Peter is disturbed by Jesus' acceptance of suffering and death.

In the verses just prior to today's reading Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is. Peter answers: "*the Messiah,*" a title meaning someone anointed by God for a specific purpose. It points to Jesus' authority and power.

But then Jesus begins to tell his disciples that "*the Chosen One must undergo great suffering...and be killed...and after three days rise again.*"

The juxtaposition of the power that Peter had experienced in Jesus' healing in his ministry - and this prediction of suffering was too much for Peter. He rebukes Jesus. Jesus in turn rebukes him.

Peter's difficulty is not unlike our own, or unlike Cohen's in the song. Leonard Cohen says:

A million candles burning for the help that never came.

A million candles burning for the love that never came.

Cohen fumes that millions are asking/praying for help, but God does not answer. God is supposed to love humans, but there is no help.

So Cohen imputes ill-will to God.

He ponders if it might be God's will that humans hurt and harm, and that the evil acts of humanity are in fact humans doing God's will.

*You (he says, addressing God) *want it darker**

*We *kill the flame**

The antithesis of a merciful and loving God.

In this bald and appalling statement, "*you want it darker, we kill the flame*" Cohen is rejecting theologies that attribute the state of the world to God. If God is in control, as conservative people of many faiths claim, then God is a bastard. And Cohen has had enough of that God.

If you are the dealer, I'm out of the game

If you are the healer, it means I'm broken and lame

If thine is the glory then mine must be the shame

He's saying that I've had enough of an image of God that makes me a peon in a horrifying game. I've had enough of being a toy for God, for the god who lets people suffer, while rabbis and priests sing glory to God and assign all the shame to suffering people.

He recognises that religion has been used a "lullaby for suffering" – as Marx says, an opiate for the people. In its constant reference to human sinfulness for which God requires payment, religion has been used to disempower and keep poor people, ordinary people, submissive to priestly power.

Cohen also names political abuses and military collusion. Killing by the powerful is often given theological justification.

But Cohen will not be subservient. He is prepared to stand before this God.

Hineni, hineni

I'm ready, my lord

Hineni, used many times in the Hebrew Bible literally means “behold” but it is understood to mean “Here I am” as in “Here I am Lord.”

This is not the compliant “here I am Lord” of the familiar hymn. This is not Cohen on his knees, seeking a call.

Cohen is defiant – Behold. Here I stand. I’m ready to go. But not because I’m trusting in your will, God. I’m ready to go because I will not comply with the order of suffering and violence that seems to be your will. I want out of the game. It was never my game.

He weaves Jewish and Christian images and liturgies into the song.

"Magnified, Sanctified be thy holy name" is a direct translation of the first four words of the mourners’ Kaddish, a Jewish prayer said by close relatives of a deceased person after their burial.

"Vilified, crucified, in the human frame" is certainly a reference to Jesus.

Flowing between the traditions, he takes from each what fits his litany of suffering as he addresses God.

Cohen’s struggle, I think, resonates with that of the disciple Peter – though we know much less about what Peter was thinking. Both are asking: How do we reconcile suffering with the divine?

Yet Jesus offers something new, an understanding that I think Cohen probably believed, that we have yet to integrate into our world view.

Jesus knows that if his ministry is to continue in accordance with God’s will, it will inevitably bring him into deadly conflict with the religious and political authorities.

He sees it as unavoidable. The activist Jesuit priest Daniel Berrigan once said that *“if you want to follow Jesus, you had better look good on wood.”*

I appreciate Cohen’s tough theological questions: exploring the nature of the Holy and our relationship to it.

In response to Cohen, though, I want to say what God is not for me: God, for me, is not a person-like being who is in control of every event of the universe, who can be placated by our prayers and petitions or influenced by our behaviour. Neither is God a player manipulating us for good or evil.

For me God consciousness is opening, seeking and experiencing the holy, the divine power that is at the heart of the universe. God flows through all that is, and is present in all that is life-giving.

Everything we say about God is metaphor so please bear that in mind as you hear what I am trying to say about the Sacred.

We cannot pin it down and yet the spiritual life enables us to experience Divine Presence, to know very profoundly the truth that is love and goodness and beauty, to sense that there is a path we can choose which enhances life, and there is another one that we can also choose - which leads to the annihilation of life.

And I seek - and we seek - to order our lives around the story of Jesus of Nazareth, the one who most profoundly showed us what God is like and what it is to live in harmony with the divine.

As part of that, I reject the doctrine of atonement in its classic form, which tells of a God who looked down and saw a wicked world that must be punished for its sins. And so sent his son Jesus to earth to pay the price for the sinfulness of the world. I reject the picture of a god who desires violence. I believe that Jesus was pointing us to a God who relates to us in two primary ways:

Firstly God, the divine power, is love - and when we open ourselves to this power we know that we too are loved and accepted and embraced.

Secondly, and perhaps this is where I most differ from Cohen, I believe that this God allows us freedom. God does not intervene in every detail of our lives because God knows that creation needs freedom. In a way, it as if God who desires to be in relation with creation, knows that the relationship cannot be true relation, if we do not have freedom.

And so we say that Jesus, the Christ, is the incarnation of love and freedom. In Christa/Community, that which has carried on since the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth, we may also know the incarnation of love and freedom.

For love and freedom are the core of human life. When I address God in prayer and song, I am not speaking to God as a sort of super-person. Rather I am opening myself to the God who is within me, the God who is among us and the God who is beyond us. Somehow the creation of which we are part is infused with this god-power.

I cannot prove this. I can only believe it and try to live as if I believe it, for that is what it is to have faith. Dorothy McRae-McMahon, in her book *Everyday Passion*, wrote about three options for world-views available for us.

First "*we can decide that at the centre of everything there is evil...it carries little hope and it violates our view of ourselves and those we know.*" Some of the time, but some of the time we experience the world as Cohen does in that song.

Or, secondly, she says that: "*we can decide that there is nothing, or chaos at the centre of everything, or if there were somebody or something, that 'thing' or 'one' is now gone.*"

She says that there are two ways of responding to that perception. Some try to live their lives without trying to find pattern or meaning in it. Those people can have a very high sense of responsibility, a calling, somehow in their own understanding, to live justly and creatively. However, they see human beings as being alone in this endeavour. They live to please no God, but to live with integrity. For Christians these are our secular partners.

But there are others in this category who live only for themselves because they see no larger picture and no purpose in doing anything else.

The third world-view response that Dorothy describes is that *“we can decide to believe that in spite of the random justice and injustice of life, at the centre of everything lies love and good—we may call that energy, or being, different names.*

People who choose this option face life deciding how to connect with and interpret the activity of this power whom some will call God.” There are people of many faiths who hold to this understanding.

This is what the earliest disciples called “The Way.” It is from this perspective that I speak of God and of human suffering and injustice. Peter wanted Jesus to be God’s beloved child, but didn’t want the freedom that is also part of the essence of human life.

I don’t believe that illness, death, suffering or injustice are ‘sent by God.’ I don’t believe that there is a God who selects people to test with injustices to see how strong they are. I don’t believe God gives some parents a severely disabled child because they are, in God’s opinion, able to handle that.

That god is less loving than most of us. That god is playing with people’s lives.

What is different from this view, and the view of the universe that sees nothing or chaos at the heart of the universe, is that along with suffering, sorrow and trouble, there is also God, being, power - which is God which is love; and in which we can trust.

We know that when we experience a sense of that caring, a connection with us in our grieving, our weakness, our fear and our pain. I cannot prove the existence of this caring God. It is an act of faith to believe it, and to live “as if” we believe it.

Jesus believed in the promise of God to those who live faithfully, to those who, like Abraham and Sarah, trust God.

But he wasn’t just thinking about that for himself. For what is true of the Chosen One is also true for all humans. Saving one’s life at the expense of God’s good news will be the loss of one’s soul, one’s true self, one’s very own life.

Believing God’s promise means acting with the courage of hope. Sometimes we can do that with full confidence, sometimes (like Sarah) in laughing wonder, sometimes with fear and trepidation, and sometimes we find it hard to hope and we, like Cohen, rage against all that is broken in the universe.

We don’t have to understand everything. Our metaphors don’t have to be perfect. Trusting God’s promise involves giving one’s heart to hope. Believing means having enough confidence in the reality of it to act on it—incredible though it may seem.