

## **“Unreasonable Love”**

Matthew 28:1-10

April 16, 2017

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### Easter Sunrise Service

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Word is, next year Ash Wednesday is on February 14<sup>th</sup> and Easter will be on April one. The date of Easter varies because it follows the Jewish Passover according to ancient custom. “Because Jewish holidays are based on solar and lunar cycles,” the date of Easter is reliant on [that] calendar and that makes it a movable holiday. Over time, the Western Christian Church has developed what is called the Ecclesiastical calendar and according to this schedule, the first Ecclesiastical Full Moon date after March 20 is the Paschal/Easter Moon. The possible dates for Easter are between March 22<sup>nd</sup> and April 25<sup>th</sup>. Just so you get all the points on the next church trivia quiz, the Eastern Orthodox Church follows the Julian calendar, we the Gregorian, which is why their dates do not coincide with ours. Periodically, the Eastern and Western traditions talk picking one day for Easter but it hasn’t happened yet.

To that we add the Common Lectionary, crafted by committee back in the 1980’s, which gives four suggested biblical readings for each Sunday in a three year cycle, one year each for Matthew, Mark, and Luke in that order with the gospel of John broken apart and used in each of the three years. Then added to all of this is the church seasons: the church year begins with Advent into Christmas and Christmastide; followed by what is known as Ordinary Time; then we have Ash Wednesday into Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and Eastertide which ends with Pentecost and Trinity Sunday sometime in May or June; and then follows a longer stretch of Ordinary Time until Christ the King Sunday and the whole pattern.

I offer this to you today because it has the power to ground us. It offers us the ancient practice of meeting God through God’s story; it offers us a pattern of being church. It offers us a place to live and move and have our being no matter what is happening in the outer world. This is not to ignore the outer world, but an invitation to engage the outer world in a liturgical way.

The church seasons are both descriptive of Jesus’ life and ministry and a symbolic way to live the Christian life – in Advent we wait for the Christ child to be born by listening to readings from the Bible that remind us why we need a Savior. From this we learn the sacred practice of active waiting, we learn to discern our needs, prejudices, and hopes as we prepare for what is to come rather than be passive and give in to distraction, to feel like a victim, or miss opportunities. Pregnancy or the beginning of an adoption process are great examples of active waiting; for some families it might prompt a move into a larger home, most prepare a room/nursery, and extended family and friends hold showers so there will be clothing, diapers, and toys to welcome the new little one and all of these are acts of love that prepare the heart for parenting.

I found interim ministry to be a way to help a church stand in an extended Advent as they waited and worked toward readiness for a new pastor. There is a lot of waiting in our lives – often we do it anxiously or absently – but as in everything God hopes for us to do it intentionally. The same is true for times of introspection and our hopes for changing for the better; these are the practices of Lent. The death of a loved one can be an extended Good Friday feeling while falling in love, new birth, new work, and new possibilities of all kinds can make us feel more alive and give us an extended Easter. Cycling through the seasons liturgically helps us in life.

Two summers ago, seminary professor Paul Capetz preached here in July. Unusually, his biblical text was from the Easter lectionary so the opening hymn that day was the same one we sang this morning. As I processed in with Jeff and Paul, I could tell the congregation was singing with a passion beyond the average, when I got to the front and turned around, I saw such joy on so many faces that I could see it touched people deeply. So once we know the cycle well, breaking the cycle, any cycle, can be an in breaking of the Spirit.

All of this is to say, we celebrate Easter on this Sunday morning, April 16, 2017, because of ecclesiastical moons, and lectionaries, and church history and constant yearly cycle of remembering who God is and what God has done. God saves, God works toward redemption, always and in every time and place; Resurrection Day is our ultimate joy. However, Easter doesn't fix the world; Easter offers us the opportunity to enter into the process of salvation because there isn't any event or emotion in life that God has not already encountered, accompanied, endured, and altered.

Even so, as worldwide political tensions mounted this week, I couldn't help but think, it doesn't feel like Easter! I found myself trying to keep up with the news but also growing impatient with it. There is nothing in the way news is reported that invokes healthy waiting or introspection – in some ways it does the opposite by intent so we will “stay-tuned,” they want us to be anxious in order to keep us tuned in to their coverage and their sponsors. What I found most faithful were two music videos: Justin Timberlake's Worldwide Dance Video for Love, and one with five, young Jewish men (We Are the Jews Facebook page) singing their own words to Bruno Mars' *Uptown Funk*, for Passover. It starts at the Seder table breaking up the Matzah, goes to breakdancing in the living room, and then out on the street with the neighborhood kids. I watched several times because it got caught in my brain: “Jews wrote the Hallelujah, Jews, wrote the Hallelujah.” It's so true.

Years ago, when a now college junior and high school senior were still in car seats, I was on a road trip with friends. They had an SUV with a 5 CD carousel and at one point, instead of listening to one whole CD, each chose a favorite track. Children's minds being what they are, they knew the order of the five and the number of every song and made their selections. They wanted me to have a song too so, after a little discussion (strictly by number and not by title) they chose one for me. It was Rufus Wainwright's rendition of Leonard Cohen's “Hallelujah” from the *Shrek* soundtrack. I'd heard it before of course, but from that moment on, it was my song as gifted to me by these children.

These children were in first grade and pre-school in a Christian school and they knew I was a Presbyterian minister. I got the ‘hallelujah’; all these years, and still today, I believe we who have faith in the God of Abraham are the keepers of the hallelujah. This word comes from the Hebrew and is a combination of two roots: *hallelu* – which means ‘praise’ and *jah* – which means ‘God’/‘Yahwah’. *Hallelu* used on its own in Isaiah is translated as “emitting light” or ‘to praise God so well we can brag about it.’ Hallelujah, according to a Jewish publication, is a “tradition of letting go in surrender to God” (Abarim Publications website). Again, it is not passively letting a rope or balloon slide from your hand or a turning away from an opportunity but climbing to the top of the high dive and doing your best swan dive into the deep end. Hallelujah has a connotative exuberance, of letting go of restraints and inhibitions. It does come with the caution however, that care should be given to whom and what we surrender. The scriptures also say that the *hallelu* can fall into ‘madness’ and ‘folly’ if not rooted in the “*jah*/God.” Unrooted/ungrounded *hallelu* can end up, in one commentator's words, as a “detrimental flight with no one at the helm.” That describes the way the world feels to me right now. More like a continuous Maundy Thursday than an Easter Sunday.

Even so, we praise God because God is bringing salvation. In a 1980's interview with Leonard Cohen shortly after composing his “Hallelujah,” he said, “The word Hallelujah is of course rich, it's so abundant in resonances. You know it is a wonderful word to sing and people have been singing it for thousands of years. It seems to call down some kind of beneficial energy just when you declare it in

the face of the kind of catastrophes that are manifesting everywhere just to say: 'Hallelujah.' To praise the energy that manifests both as good and evil, just to affirm our little journey here. It is very invigorating to sing that word." Here Cohen names the blessing and the challenge, the energies of earth, energies we human beings engage manifest as both good and evil.

In another interview in the nineties, Cohen went a little further, he said, "I know there is an eye that watches all of us. There is a judgment that weighs everything we do. And before this great force which is greater than any government, I stand in awe and kneel in respect. And it is to this great judgment that I dedicate" this song."

In the history of the church, we have withheld the hallelujahs to use only for the best and greatest good; it is still part of the rigor of the church that we do not sing or say 'alleluias' during Lent. So Easter Sunday has been all the more joyful, all the more liberating. And it's true, Jesus was raised, the earth shook, unbelievers became like the dead; it's good news, it is our joy! But, liturgically, to some degree, we've kept the good and the bad separated. We have to be more honest about the monster systems where good and evil are so thoroughly intertwined that we cannot agree on what is good and what is evil, like racism, the money making institutions, those that give us information and the bodies that are supposed to protect and serve.

This is the day of the hallelujahs – and we say them and sing them, so Easter – which is knowledge of the life-giving power of God – will sink into our blood and our bones. We say them and sing them so that hallelujah become a part of our DNA. It is a gift from God who loves beyond all reason! Saying it, singing it, changes us, changes the way we feel, changes our ability to hope.

And there's one more thing that Cohen got right – Easter and the Hallelujah incorporate both the "minor fall and the major lift." In both fear and joy, through the evil and the good, in both life and death, know this and know it well, before we get to those darkest places, God is already at work; God works in the dark of the tomb to bring life, in the dark of the soul to bring life, and in the darkest hour, to bring life. Hallelujah! Amen.