

**Litany of Hallelujah—Rev. Rita Capezzi**  
**UUFM—12 11 22**

**Opening Words**

Welcome to this service highlighting Leonard Cohen's iconic song "Hallelujah." I thank Nancy Cramblit and Alicia Bayer for suggesting this worship, appropriate for our Soul Matters month of "Wonder." There is a copy of various lyrics available if you want to read and sing along.

"In Western Christianity, *Lectio Divina* (Latin for "Divine Reading") is a traditional monastic practice of scriptural reading, meditation, and prayer intended to promote communion with God [. . .]. [Lectio Divina] it does not treat Scripture as texts to be studied, but as the living word." This morning, we participate in a uniquely Unitarian Universalist musical Lectio Divina, intended to contemplate a song as sacred text, enabling us to enact an earthly sacred, where we resonate as individuals and community, where we learn our solo limits and reach for each other.

Cohen recorded "Hallelujah" in 1984, and this morning we will hear multiple live and recorded versions of it. "Hallelujah" became the most-recorded song of the last 50 years, perhaps for the ways that Cohen powerfully entwined the so-called sacred and the so-called secular. "In the Hebrew Bible, [Hallelujah] is a compound word, from *hallelu*, meaning 'to praise joyously,' and *yah*, a shortened form of the unspoken name of God. So, 'hallelujah' is an active imperative," an instruction, an invitation to listeners to sing to tribute the holy. For Unitarian Universalists, the sacred extends beyond any notion of God to include the generativity and liveliness of the self-creating universe. Let's think today on the many ways and reasons to sing hallelujah. So let us begin, and let us feel invited.

**Reading**

Cohen wrote and recorded his "Hallelujah" in 1984, and no one in the US really knew about it until Bob Dylan began covering it in the late 1980s. Covers include lyrics that Cohen wrote but did not incorporate into his own version. Jeff Buckley's version in 1994 has become the most familiar rendering, including Cohen's first two verses and three verses you heard in the Rufus Wainwright version with the Announcements this morning. Your handout has the lyrics. All the versions maintain a sort of play between certainty and confusion, between power and brokenness, between a disembodied spiritual and an embodied sexuality.

In verses one and two, Cohen introduces godly men who fall to the forces of earthly love. King David rises to prominence on the strength of his "heroic harpist's 'secret chord,' with its special spiritual power." The temptations of the flesh, in the form of Bathsheba bathing on the roof, however, overthrow him, much as the strongman judge Samson was overthrown by Delilah when she broke his throne and cut his hair and enslaved him. The three verses popularized by Jeff Buckley emphasize the challenges of love, of the "cold and broken Hallelujah" between lovers who find their way difficult and painful.

No, “love is not a victory march,” the lessons of love can seem competitive and dangerous. We try to follow our hearts and see where they lead. We wonder why we are here in this life, with its pain and confusion. Yes, the hallelujah is cold and broken. And yet the hallelujah is called for. The hallelujah is necessary. The hallelujah is raised again and again and again.

### **Prayer/Meditation**

Unnamable God, Sources of All to Whom we raise an Alleluia,  
a praise of the more-than-the-ordinary within the everyday.

Our tongues are baffled.

We fail.

We find ourselves alone and frightened.

The holidays are not what we wish them to be.

Our loved ones are not always whom we need them to be.

We are not all that we are capable of being.

What can we do when it all goes wrong?

Maybe, just maybe, in the struggle and the fear,

in the mess and the failure,

we do our best, even if it is not much.

We simply try to act with love.

We act with love.

We love.

Love is our Hallelujah,

Our active imperative toward the unexpected and unearned joy that is living,  
despite all that we do and all that is done to us to the contrary.

Hallelujah, always within the struggle and the fear, the mess and the failure.

We love.

### **Reading**

“In the Christian tradition, ‘hallelujah’ is a word of praise rather than a direction to offer praise – which became the more common colloquial use of the word as an expression of joy or relief, a synonym for ‘Praise the Lord,’ rather than a prompting to action.” We might be familiar as well with the Latinize “Alleluia.” In the offertory, that will be the only word we hear. Alleluia. Alleluia, over and over. Praise the Lord. Praise the most high. Praise the deepest unnamable. Praise the most expansive ultimate.

Alleluia. It’s a form of relief. Everything is ok. Everything is right with the world. One might think that King David’s “secret chord” that “pleased the Lord” was enough. One might think that the song’s structure—“the fourth, the fifth, the minor fall, and the major lift”—would be enough. One might think that the “signature prayer-like incantation” of the repeated Hallelujah, the song filled only with Alleluia would be enough.

But what if “you don’t really care for music, do you?”  
 And after your strength is gone, “from your lips she drew the Hallelujah.”  
 Even if taking the Name in vain, “well really, what’s it to you?”  
 And what if “I’ve told the truth, I didn’t come to fool you.”

Is the Hallelujah enough? Are the slant rhymes of “you” or “ya” with Hallelujah enough? Does hallelujah remain cold and broken? Does it matter which you heard, “the holy or the broken Hallelujah”?

King David and Samson, these musicians and poets, how fallen they are. These old stories conceive of their fall at the hands of women, so overtly a re-telling of the Genesis story and the sin of Eve. But we can move beyond this construct and focus on their “vaingloriousness and their hubris.” David and Samson, they love their power, and they begin to exercise it for their own gain rather than for the people they claim as their own. They think they know what’s right. They have fallen out of relationship, with the people of whom they are a part, with God, with the larger whole. How much like King David and Samson are we all?

### Reading

We all seek that “secret chord,” that note of resonating connection binding us in love with our lovers, binding us in love with our families and friends, binding us in love with our communities, binding us in love with the earth, binding us with the mysterious and wonderful universe whose creativity and generativity gives rise to all of us and everything. Binding us even, I pray, in love for ourselves. All is creativity and generativity. All is linked in the love that sings praise to that ultimate connection. All is a weave the sacred and the secular—bodily love and love of our physical reality, that is a form of the sacred.

“There’s a blaze of light in every word; / it doesn’t matter which you heard, / the holy, or the broken Hallelujah!” this is the central promise of Cohen’s song: “the value, even the necessity of the song of praise in the face of confusion, doubt, or dread. [. . .] We will be hurt, tested, and challenged. Love will break our hearts, music will offer solace that we may or may not hear, we will be faced with joy and with pain.” But we ought not “surrender to despair or nihilism. Holy or broken, there is still hallelujah.”

And though some may feel the song is grim or sorrowful, “‘Hallelujah’ was in fact inspired by a more positive feeling. ‘It’s a rather joyous song,’ Cohen said when [it] was released. ‘I like very much the last verse – “And even though it all went wrong, / I’ll stand before the Lord of Song / with nothing on my lips but Hallelujah!” Though subsequent interpreters didn’t always retain this verse, its significance to Cohen has never waned.’” Cohen himself always sang “with nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah,” as does Albert the Fish, which you will hear as the postlude. Earthier, less polite than “lips,” perhaps. An acknowledgement that dirty or clean, Hallelujah is always and already utterly necessary to embrace and honor this one life of which we are certain.

### Closing Words

Leonard Cohen said, “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! Blessed is the name.”” Hallelujah, the unknowable name of God because the creative imperative of the universe is too vast and deep to capture in a word, in a name, in a 100 or 1000 names. And Hallelujah for UUs includes the sacred of our bodies and our sexuality. That we feel and we touch, that the holy and the broken are in fact one and the same. And we are called by creation to praise and rejoice, called to sing Hallelujah.

And Cohen also said this about his song, expletive amended: “The only moment that you can live here comfortably in these absolutely irreconcilable conflicts is in this moment when you embrace it all and you say, ‘Look, I don’t understand an effing thing at all – Hallelujah!’ That’s the only moment that we live here fully as human beings.” We can’t know it all, understand it all, reconcile it all. And yet we live with gratitude for life and for each other.

It matters that we are each here. It matters that we try to do our best. It matters that we acknowledge our rootedness to this earth and our connectedness to each other, even when our best is not enough to make everything better. It matters that we tell the truth, to each other and to ourselves. It matters that we admit our limitations, so that we might learn from each other. And it matters that we offer praise and celebration of our lives. It matters that we sing Hallelujah. It matters that we sing Hallelujah together, as a people in loving community, today and every day, as you remember that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together “Amen.”

<https://www.rollingstone.com/feature/how-leonard-cohens-hallelujah-brilliantly-mingled-sex-religion-194516/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lectio\\_Divina](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lectio_Divina)

Leonard Cohen’s version on the Various Positions album (1984)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttEMYvpoR-k>

Rufus Wainwright’s version from Shrek (2001) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7iDfvoqOhD8>

John Cale’s version (1991) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DinEKqtCDkg>

Albert the Fish’s version (2014) <https://soundcloud.com/albert-the-fish-1/hallelujah-cover>

Jeff Buckley’s version (1994) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vq7bvOpf14>

Andrea Bocelli and Daughter Virginia (2021) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnCeEU3UMic>

Randall Thompson “Alleluia” performed by St Jacob’s Chamber Choir of Stockholm Sweden conducted by Gary Garden in the Basilica di San Pietro in Perugia Italy in 2016

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mz9pijkyR8A>