

## MARKED

Psalm 51: 1-12

[Ash Wednesday, 5 March 2014, Augsburg College Chapel]

Perhaps it's just me, but the most ubiquitous song on the Pandora channels I happen to listen to is Leonard Cohen's anthem, "Hallelujah" – just about every artist out there has covered it; it's even in a Shrek movie! I'm sure most of you know its familiar lyrics:

*Now I've heard there was a secret chord  
That David played, and it pleased the Lord  
But you don't really care for music, do you?  
It goes like this  
The fourth, the fifth  
The minor fall, the major lift  
The baffled king composing Hallelujah  
Hallelujah  
Hallelujah  
Hallelujah  
Hallelujah*

*Your faith was strong but you needed proof  
You saw her bathing on the roof  
Her beauty and the moonlight overthrew you  
She tied you  
To a kitchen chair  
She broke your throne, and she cut your hair  
And from your lips she drew the Hallelujah*

What you may not know is that Psalm 51, which is assigned for our Ash Wednesday reflections, is the purported response of this baffled king – King David, of whose lineage a savior was born – this broken king, tempted by his own power, drawn to Bathsheba, another man's wife, caught in the lies of his adultery, ultimately scheming to have her husband killed in battle. It's not an uplifting story. This baffled, broken king – marked by his pride, his grasping of human power, his coveting of what he could not have – and in this psalm, longing for the hallelujah..."Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love...For I know my transgressions...Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." Marked by sin and longing for salvation.

I worked in Chicago's loop district for many years and nearly every Ash Wednesday I would spend my lunch hour queued up with my fellow workers at St. Peter's in the Loop, a Roman Catholic parish, where the priests would set up shop in the church basement, marking thousands of the baffled, broken and longing faithful with the smudge of ashes on our foreheads. Have mercy on me, we would pray – create a clean heart within me, we would sing

– as we headed back onto the streets of the city, back to our work and lives and business, longing for the hallelujah, the joy of God’s salvation. Marked and longing.

Some of you may know that in our liturgical tradition, we stop singing service music and hymns with ‘alleluias’ during the season of Lent. In fact, at a church I once attended, the children paraded an alleluia banner around the sanctuary during our closing hymn on the Sunday before Lent and then the banner was taken to an undisclosed location, where it remained until Easter Sunday.

Here is the wonder of this Ash Wednesday liturgical moment for God’s faithful people. We gather here to be marked, to admit that we are baffled and broken, and Sonja and Justin will smudge our foreheads to remind us and all the world that we have sinned and done what is evil. But there is something more in this smudge – something more that sometimes gets overlooked because those priests in Chicago and our good pastors here cannot be all that precise with their smudging, it’s messy business with the ashes – and that something more is that the smudge is a cross, the cross that we believe restores in us a clean heart, that has made our spirit right, that has brought us, once and for always, the joy of God’s salvation. It is the cross that calls us to the table of reconciliation.

Martin Luther tells us in his *Small Catechism* that we should begin and end each day by making the sign of the cross and recalling the covenant of our baptisms when we were marked with the cross of Christ forever. We remain baffled and broken, but we also stand as those marked with the cross that is our salvation.

I began with the words of Leonard Cohen and end with those of Biblical scholar and poet, Walter Brueggeman, from his poem “Marked with ashes,”

*We are able to ponder our ashness with  
some confidence, only because our every Wednesday of ashes  
anticipates your Easter victory over that dry, flaky taste of death.*

*On this Wednesday, we submit our ashen way to you —  
you Easter parade of newness.  
Before the sun sets, take our Wednesday and Easter us,  
Easter us to joy and energy and courage and freedom;  
Easter us that we may be fearless for your truth.  
Come here and Easter our Wednesday with  
mercy and justice and peace and generosity.*

*We pray as we wait for the Risen One who comes soon.*

And we can’t help but whisper along with King David, my fellow Chicago workers and all God’s faithful people as we enter these forty days of Lent – all of us marked and longing in this time of repentance and conversion – we can’t help but whisper...hallelujah. Amen.