Benediction: God of love, thank you for sending your Son so that even in my brokenness I can still come into your presence. I speak in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Leonard Cohen was a Canadian poet, singer and songwriter. He was perhaps most famous for having written the song “Broken Hallelujah,” which was featured in the movie, the Shrek in 2001, and climbed to the Top 100 in November 2016 just after Cohen’s death. Cohen wrote 80 verses of the song, different combinations of which have been recorded by a large and diverse group of singers.[[1]](#endnote-1) Canadian figure skater Patrick Chan skated to a version of the song in the Olympics. The song’s lyrics retell first Old Testament stories and then modern-day human stories in which human kind sins and becomes broken. But despite the many examples of brokenness in the song, one of its last lines is "I'll stand before the lord of song with nothing on my tongue but hallelujah.”

Cohen, an ethnic Jew who described himself as not really being religious, was interviewed by the New York Times shortly before his death. He said, “What I mean to say [in this song] is that there are many things about Christianity that attract me. The figure of Jesus is extremely attractive. It's difficult not to fall in love with that person." He went on to praise Christ's emphasis on resurrection and rebirth and then said, "When we have this notion that there is no mechanism for resurrection, there is no redemption from sin, then we are forced to embrace evil and we get the kind of activity like genocide.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

The flip side of what Cohen said is that because Jesus died and rose again, we are redeemed from sin and we have Christ’s presence in the world to bring light into the darkness of evil. Because God loved the world so much that He sent His Son to be lifted up onto the cross, we all can stand before God, broken as we are, and praise Him. Although Cohen looks at this as standing before God’s throne in the end times, singing praises, I believe that Jesus’s death means that we, broken as we are with the sins and burdens of the world, can also stand in God’s presence every day and sing His presence.

In the passage from Numbers, we see the Israelites who have fussed and moaned and complained about conditions in the desert, never mind that they were in the desert because God had freed them from slavery and was sending them to a beautiful land of milk and honey. And so God sends poisonous snakes to bite the people to punish them for their ungratefulness. Yet, God provides a means by which they can be saved. God has Moses put a bronze snake on a pole and lift it up high above the people so that anyone who is dying from the poisonous snake bite may look upon what has been lifted up and live.

In the Gospel, Jesus links his being lifted up on the cross, high above the city, with this Old Testament event. Whoever looks upon the cross, demonstrating trust in God, will feel the saving love and embrace of God no matter what poisons his heart. God loves all of us so much he wants all of us to come into His presence in praise, regardless of how broken we are, no matter whether we have always put God first in our lives, no matter whether we have always put the needs of our neighbor equal to our own. We can look upon Jesus, the perfect sacrifice for our brokenness and sin, and be made whole again. We can look upon Jesus, lifted up on the cross for us, and come into God’s presence with a song of praise on our lips now and in the life to follow. God has done all this, but God asks that we look to Him alone in faith – God asks that we trust in Him and not ourselves. God gives us grace, but God allows us to choose whether or not to accept it.

According to theologian Frederick Beuchner:

“We believe in God—such as it is, we have faith—because certain things happened to us once and go on happening. We work and goof off, we love and dream, we have wonderful times and awful times, are cruelly hurt and hurt others cruelly, get mad and bored and scared stiff and ache with desire, do all such human things as these, and if our faith is not mainly just window dressing or a rabbit’s foot or fire insurance, it is because it grows out of precisely this kind of rich human compost. The God of biblical faith is the God who meets us at those moments in which for better or worse we are being most human, most ourselves; and if we lose touch with those moments, if we don’t stop from time to time to notice what is happening to us and around us and inside us, we run the tragic risk of losing touch with God too.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Lent is a time when we reflect on our own brokenness. Reflections such as this are important for our repentance and for our continuing walk in the Presence of Christ. But on this fourth week of Lent, the emphasis is on God’s love for us in our brokenness. God’s love, as exhibited through the gift of His Son who was lifted up on the cross for us, can heal us from whatever poisons our hearts. God’s love heals us so that we can continue to walk with Christ, singing His praises.

Amen

1. Hallelujah, Leonard Cohen song, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hallelujah\_(Leonard\_Cohen\_song) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Matt Woodley, editor, PreachingToday.com; Adapted from Joe Heschmeyer, "Leonard Cohen, The Christ-Haunted," First Things blog (11-17-16*)* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Synthesis A Weekly Resource for Preaching and Worship in the Episcopal Tradition, PNMSI Publishing Co., Inc**.** March 2018, Lent B, Week 4, quoting Frederick Buechner in Telling Secrets (N. Y.: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 35-36 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)