

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
January 17, 2021 Streaming Mass
2nd Sunday of Year B

I'm sure you are familiar with Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah." Its haunting melody has been used on any number of occasions, ranging from national tragedies to background music ice skating routines to advertising the latest model automobile. The actual words of the song don't seem to matter very much, maybe because most people don't understand what they mean. There is another song composed by Cohen, as he was approaching the end of his life (he died in 2016), and it is appropriate for today's scriptural readings. It is entitled "You Want It Darker." It is addressed to God and expresses Cohen's own feelings as he faced the darkness of his approaching death. There is one word that runs throughout the song, articulated in the soaring tenor voice of a Jewish cantor. It is the Hebrew word "Hineni" which means "Here I am."

Leonard Cohen was descended from a rabbinic family, and although his life did not always measure up to the standards of Jewish practice, his inheritance from Judaism permeated many of his musical compositions. The word "Hineni" first appears in the Bible in the book of Genesis when Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac. It appears in today's first reading at the call to Samuel. It means much more than saying "Present," as in a roll call, or telling someone on a cell phone, "I am here Starbucks." It is the name of a prayer of preparation and humility, addressed to God, chanted by the cantor on Rosh Hashanah. As Cohen uses the word in the song, just as the word is used in the Bible, it is to say in the presence of the awesome mystery of God, "Here I am at Your service." Throughout the song Cohen references many instances of what were for him evidence of the darkness in his own life and in the sufferings of the Jewish People, but still he sings, "Hineni," "Here I am." It expresses his commitment to God in the midst of the paradox of God's immensity and his own smallness. There is always the temptation to walk away. He sings, "If you are the dealer, I'm out of the game." Yet he stays. He addresses the reality of human suffering as a paradox, "If you are the healer, it means I'm broken and lame." In other words, God cannot be healer if there is nothing to heal, and so our own brokenness and ailments are necessary for God to heal. Evil and suffering function like the "negative space" in a work of art. They enable us to see beauty and goodness more clearly. If life were like the sentiments expressed in a Hallmark greeting card, all sunny and cheerful, there would be no opportunity for heroism, compassion and sacrifice. You can listen to the song on Youtube. It's readily available.

In today's Gospel Jesus invites two disciples of John the Baptist to come and stay with Him. They will follow Him on the road that leads to Good Friday and Easter Sunday, as Jesus faced and triumphed over the darkness, the suffering and the evil in His own day. That is the path we are called to follow also. What can one individual do? One of the iconic representations of an individual confronting massive evil is the photograph of young man in Tiananmen Square facing down a column of tanks. He is dressed very casually and is holding two shopping bags. He has probably come upon the scene on his way home from the food market. Instead of going on his way, he stops and walks in front of the tanks moving through the square. It is an act of protest. As the driver of the tank tries to go around him, he changes his position. The little game of cat-and-mouse goes on for a while until he is dragged away either by a friendly bystander concerned for his welfare, or by the police. No one knows what happened to him.

Today's Scripture readings challenge us as to what do I do in the face of evil. To be sure not many of us are going to measure up to the heroism of that single figure in the vastness of Tiananmen Square. But we don't have to. There is an idea expressed in a book entitled "Switch" that is called "shrinking the change." The point is that we can feel very small in the face of the immense challenges around us. One might feel paralyzed by the knowledge that any single thing one does is not going to fix any of the large scale problems we see every day. But, just because the problems are huge doesn't mean one's solution needs to be commensurately huge. The idea of "shrinking the change" is to find in one's life something that one person can do that won't solve the whole problem, but that constitutes a meaningful small step.

On Monday we celebrate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his contribution to our nation. We are at a critical moment in our nation's history. It is also a very dark moment. The events that led up to the attack on the Capitol last Wednesday are not simply a matter for political discussion, but are at they very root a matter of genuine moral concern. The president's attempt to cancel a free and fair election was an attempt to disenfranchise largely Black voters. It was racism clear and simple. The demeanor of the insurrectionists on Wednesday made that only too obvious.

Again, what can one person do? It is to be committed to the task of combating racism in whatever way we can. It might be by not taking part in racist jokes. More significantly, for anyone who engages in social medial and enters into the echo chamber of racist speech, it is simply to cut it out to give it up. If I listen over and over again to hateful speech, I will eventually become a hateful person. There's no avoiding it. To use a phrase we often heard long ago, it is "to avoid the near occasion of sin."

There may be others things one could do, but we all have to start somewhere. We have to “shrink the change,” cut the evil of racism down to the size we can handle. As followers of Jesus Christ, we have to choice but to say, “Hineni,’ “Here I am at Your service.”