

*Claude Rochon, December 3, 2017*

## **Let It Be**

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The traditional theme for the first Sunday of Advent is hope. However, the focus suggested by *Leader* magazine for Advent this year is mental health. And the official theme for today is “Let It Be”. So the meditation today will touch upon these three themes. I’ll talk first about *Let It Be*, then about hope, then about mental illness; and I’ll finish with a scripture that is not in today’s lectionary but which, I believe, brings together all three themes, and expresses how hope can always be present in our lives, even amidst the most terrible of circumstances.

### **Let It Be**

As most of you know, *Let it Be* is a song written by the Beatles (Paul McCartney, actually) in the early 1970s. I was curious as to how McCartney and the Beatles handled that theme, so I looked at the lyrics. The first two verses read as follows:

*When I find myself in times of trouble  
Mother Mary comes to me  
Speaking words of wisdom  
Let it be*

*And in my hour of darkness  
She is standing right in front of me  
Speaking words of wisdom  
Let it be*

I’ll come back to the “Mother Mary” reference in a couple of minutes, but we can notice three things here. First, the context is “times of trouble” and an “hour of darkness”. And doesn’t it seem like we are always living in those? But it is especially true for people suffering from mental illness. Second, it’s an individual thing; he’s talking about himself: “I”, “me”, “my”. Third, the solution to his predicament seems to be “words of wisdom”, and that seems to be sufficient... at least for the time being.

Then, we come to the third verse:

*And when the broken-hearted people  
Living in the world agree  
There will be an answer  
Let it be*

Two things to notice here. First, we move away from the individual “I” to community: a group of people, the “broken hearted”. Who are they? Of course, it’s

not specified but, in keeping with this month's theme, we could think about "broken" people as those suffering from mental illness, and "broken-hearted" people as those suffering more specifically from depression. Second, not just "words of wisdom" anymore but "there will be an answer". So the "words of wisdom" lead to "there will be an answer".

To me, for whom English is not his first language, "let it be" sounds like resignation: "Oh! well, there's nothing you can do about it, so just... let it be". For me, this presents two problems. First, that I should accept injustice (against me or somebody else) and just... do nothing about it. Second, and consequently, that though there may be hope for change ("there will be an answer"), there is nothing we can do about it. It is totally out of our hands.

Which brings me back to "Mother Mary": McCartney has said that it refers not to Mary, the mother of Jesus, but to his own mother, whose name was also Mary. He says that several years after her death (when he was 14), and when the Beatles were about to break up, she came to him in a dream and told him to just "let it be"; which brought him peace at that time.

Now, I don't know whether McCartney knew this or not, but in Luke's gospel, Mary, the mother of Jesus, is reported as saying "let it be" (not in English, of course). In Luke 1:38, when the angel says to Mary that she will bear the Son of God, she answers: "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*" Now this speaks to me and kind of answers my two existential problems with the expression "let it be":

First, Mary is not the type of woman who accepts injustice. In her song, the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55), just a few verses later, she says:

*52 [God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.*

Strong words of social justice: not the image of a meek and passive woman who accepts injustice. In *Leader* magazine, we read: "Meekness and obedience do have value, but a close look at the language Luke uses suggests a more active engagement with God's plan. [...] Mary is giving voice to an active commitment<sup>1</sup>." So this solves my second problem with the expression "let it be": active engagement, active commitment, not resignation. Again quoting from *Leader* magazine: "Let it be!" highlights the invitation to join with God to bring about

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<sup>1</sup> *Leader* 15/1 (Fall 2017), p. 35.

change<sup>2</sup>.” Bringing about change, in partnership with God: in other words, hope. When we understand it in this perspective, “let it be” is about hope!

## Hope

We can think of hope as a feeling. But is hope a feeling, an emotion? Does hope depend on our mood of the day? Does hope depend on our type of personality? Is hope the same as optimism? Or is it autosuggestion? Or an intrinsic characteristic of human beings? As a contemporary of McCartney sings: « *The thought that life could be better is indelibly woven into our hearts and our brains* » (Paul Simon, *Train in the Distance*). So maybe it’s part of our fundamental make-up.

And, after all, it is possible that hope is a little bit of all these things. But I think that we can also understand hope as a decision, a choice that we make in keeping with this thing we call faith and, as we will see, God’s faithfulness.

Jack Layton<sup>3</sup>’s last message to Canadians just before he passed away ended with these words: “« My friends, love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair. So let us be loving, hopeful and optimistic. And we’ll change the world. » Bringing about change. Not “let *it* be”, but “let *us* be”... hopeful. Hope as a decision!

## Mental Illness

How can people suffering from mental illness find hope?

But first, what is mental illness? I quote from a document produced by Cornell University<sup>4</sup>:

Mental Illness is a disorder that affects feelings and behaviour. [...] The causes of mental illness are complex and influenced by a person’s heredity (genes), stressful life experiences, difficult family background, physical illnesses, etc. People with mental health problems often have difficulties in coping with the pressures of daily life and can lose their jobs, their benefits, their parental rights, and their basic human rights.

The most common mental illnesses are the following:

- **Depression** – characterized [among other things] by feelings of [...] hopelessness.
- **Schizophrenia**

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> NDP leader, 2003-2011.

<sup>4</sup> « Mental Illness and Intellectual Disability », *Cornell University*, [<http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1277&context=gladnetcollect>] (consulted on November 8, 2017).

- **Anxiety disorders** – include phobic, panic and general anxiety

So, coming back to our question, how can people suffering from mental illness find hope? One would “hope” (pun intended) that one place where they can find it is in church. However, and unfortunately, it is not always the case. Let me quote a few statements found in *Leader* magazine:

“We think of Church as a place to bear each other’s burdens and share each other’s woes. Yet during times of suffering, church can seem like a hard and lonely place<sup>5</sup>.”

“Church culture is another factor in the loneliness of mental illness. How honest is the church community? Are individuals able to truly name their difficulties<sup>6</sup>?”

“Do we think of church as a place where we can speak truly of our heartfelt struggles, or is it a place where we wear a “good” Christian mask? Are we expected to live victoriously and successfully, or is adequate room made for our flawed, complex lives<sup>7</sup>?”

Of course, many churches have a time of sharing during worship services, but (again quoting from *Leader* magazine):

“Yet, in my experience, such sharing is more often related to more visible, physical illnesses. When do we pray for those who are highly anxious, depressed, or bound by addictions<sup>8</sup>?”

“It’s as if depression is a defect in character, a deficiency in spirit and soul – proof of an inadequate prayer life, perhaps<sup>9</sup>.”

“Some religious groups think that mental illness must be the result of a failing or a sin. Some think that if you pray hard enough or “give it to God”, you will be cured<sup>10</sup>.”

But think about the Apostle Paul’s experience. He prayed three times to be cured from an unspecified illness, and each time God’s answer was the same: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). And I don’t think Paul’s prayer life was inadequate.

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<sup>5</sup> Melissa Miller, “The Loneliness of Mental Illness”, *Leader* 15/1 (2017), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Harder, “One Pastor’s Journey with Depression”, *Leader* 15/1 (2017), p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Melodie Davis, “There’s Still Stigma”, *Leader* 15/1 (2017), p. 19.

So, to put it in McCartney's words, how do we move from the individual "I" receiving "words of wisdom" to the community which believes "there will be an answer" (and hopefully provides it)? Melissa Miller recommends that

"we cultivate in our worship the long-honored practice of lament. In lament, we cry out to God, giving voice to the deep sadness that accompanies our humanity, calling on to God to make things right, to bring about the vision of God's kingdom as it is in heaven. With our laments, we can hold out hope without demanding quick or easy fixes<sup>11</sup>."

Now, I'm not suggesting in any way that we should formally introduce this here, but it does bring me to my final scripture, the third chapter of the Book of... Lamentations.

### **Lament**

This scripture is not in today's lectionary but, as I said, it expresses how hope can always be present in our lives, even amidst the most terrible of circumstances, and whether it is related to mental illness or not.

The book of Lamentations is attributed to the prophet Jeremiah and, as the title suggests, he is not a happy camper. Jerusalem has fallen to the Babylonian armies: the city has been razed to the ground. The Temple, symbol of God's alliance with Israel, has been destroyed. Many have been massacred, others (the elite) taken into captivity. Those who stayed behind suffer from famine: Jeremiah even hints that there have been acts of cannibalism, and also acts of sexual violence. It would be an understatement to say that these are "times of trouble" and an "hour of darkness" (as McCartney puts it in his song).

### ***Lamentation 3:1-23***

*I am one who has seen affliction  
under the rod of God's wrath;  
2 he has driven and brought me  
into darkness without any light;      [...no hope]  
3 against me alone he turns his hand,  
again and again, all day long.  
4 He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,  
and broken my bones;  
5 he has besieged and enveloped me  
with bitterness and tribulation;*

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<sup>11</sup> Melissa Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> *he has made me sit in darkness* [... people suffering from depression]  
*like the dead of long ago.*

<sup>7</sup> *He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;*

[... people with anxiety feel walled in by their anxious thoughts;  
from which they feel they can't escape]

*he has put heavy chains on me;*

<sup>8</sup> *though I call and cry for help,*

*he shuts out my prayer;*

<sup>9</sup> *he has blocked my ways with hewn stones,*

*he has made my paths crooked.*

<sup>10</sup> *He is a bear lying in wait for me,*

*a lion in hiding;*

<sup>11</sup> *he led me off my way and tore me to pieces;*

*he has made me desolate;* [... people living with depression]

<sup>12</sup> *he bent his bow and set me*

*as a mark for his arrow.*

<sup>13</sup> *He shot into my vitals*

*the arrows of his quiver;*

<sup>14</sup> *I have become the laughing-stock of all my people,*

[... rejected from community; as too often happen to people suffering from  
mental illness]

*the object of their taunt-songs all day long.*

<sup>15</sup> *He has filled me with bitterness,*

*he has glutted me with wormwood.*

<sup>16</sup> *He has made my teeth grind on gravel,*

*and made me cower in ashes;*

<sup>17</sup> *my soul is bereft of peace;* [... think about anxiety]

*I have forgotten what happiness is;* [... think about depression]

<sup>18</sup> *so I say, 'Gone is my glory,*

*and all that I had hoped for from the LORD.'* [... he has lost hope even from  
the Lord]

<sup>19</sup> *The thought of my affliction and my homelessness*

*is wormwood and gall!*

<sup>20</sup> *My soul continually thinks of it* [... anxiety]

*and is bowed down within me* [... depression]

So now that you are all thoroughly depressed – and thus can feel a little of what people living daily with mental illness can feel – we come to verse 21:

<p><sup>21</sup> <i>But this I call to mind,</i>            [... a decision!] <i>and therefore I have hope:</i>            [... hope as a decision!]</p>
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And what does he “call to mind”?

<p><sup>22</sup> <i>The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,</i> <i>his mercies never come to an end;</i> <sup>23</sup> <i>they are new every morning;</i> <i>great is your faithfulness.</i></p>
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You can almost hear him add: “So, LET IT BE!” Even though... all the bad stuff he said in the first 20 verses. But not “let it be” based on resignation: “let it be”, based on hope – a hope which is itself based on God’s faithfulness.

### **Conclusion**

The Book of the Lamentations is actually a call to hope: a hope that is based on the very nature of God – a foundation that the worst of calamities cannot undermine. “Let it be” is not resignation. It is hope based on the faithfulness of God. It is active commitment, active engagement with God’s plan.

In one of Leonard Cohen’s song (“*Anthem*”), he says: “There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in”. So whenever we feel “cracked” – due to mental illness or otherwise – what Leonard Cohen is telling us is: “that’s how the light gets in”. And maybe we can understand this as the light at the end of the tunnel: in other words... hope!