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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

December 8, 2024

Year C, 2 Advent, Revised Common Lectionary

[Baruch 5:1-9](#)

[Canticle 16](#)

[Philippians 1:3-11](#)

[Luke 3:1-6](#)

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To have any hope of setting this world right, first you have to be able to imagine it the way it could be.

That's what a prophet is really. Someone who sees the world clearly as it is, yet also can see it the way it could be, the way it should be. Prophets are often unpopular because they draw attention to what's wrong. But you can't say something is wrong unless you have an idea of what's right. And that can make prophets oddly compelling. John the Baptist preached a message of repentance. Yet the people flocked to him. He told them to change their lives; and maybe for the first time, they felt like they actually could.

He gave them hope, not a kind of soft, pat-on-the-back hope, but a bracing hope; a hope that there could be a better world, not by ignoring the wrongness but by confronting it. A world where what was crooked could actually be straightened out, where what was rough could be made smooth, where every valley could be lifted up and every mountain made low.

Those words are famous to anyone who's ever heard Handel's *Messiah*; words from a prophecy by Isaiah, and also echoed in our first reading today from Baruch. Handel brings them to life by setting them to music in a way that's almost literal, painting the text by swooping up on "exalted" and diving low on "made low" and switching between wiggly and straight on "the crooked straight." Recently I read the brand-new book by Charles King, also titled *Every Valley*, that tells the story of how Handel's *Messiah* was created in a time curiously similar to ours.

It was the eighteenth century, and Britain was a world superpower, culturally and economically dominant, yet threatened by instability and decline. The new medium known as *newspapers* had transformed communication, and not in a way everyone thought was for the better: now information could travel across the nation in a single day, scurrilous rumors could be repeated, there were no controls on who could publish what, and truth and facts seemed lost in a maelstrom of what was most sensational or what appealed most to one side's political sensibilities. Meanwhile the kingdom was divided between those loyal to the reigning king George and those who thought he was an illegitimate usurper and looked for his rival James to return and claim the throne.

It was a time of anxiety and change and division. And in that time, *Messiah* emerged from an unlikely partnership. Charles Jennens was a traditionalist at heart. He was a nonjuror, one of those who had refused to swear the oath to the new king, which made him inherently suspicious. Meanwhile George Frideric Handel was practically a court musician to the King; he wrote the anthem for his coronation and was on the royal payroll. But Jennens loved art and music and especially the music of Handel, and the two of them became friends.

In 1741 Charles Jennens sent Handel a manuscript to set to music. It wasn't Jennens' own writing. It was just a selection of verses taken from here and there throughout scripture, arranged to tell the story of Christ in a kind of cosmic drama. Handel set it to music in a feverish stretch of less than four weeks. And by the end of his lifetime it would eclipse almost everything else he ever wrote. Today you can find a performance of Handel's *Water Music* or *Music for the Royal Fireworks* or *Israel in Egypt* here and there. But *Messiah* is performed literally thousands of times per year around the world. There are more than a dozen performances happening this month in the Bay Area alone, from the San Francisco Symphony to Grace Cathedral to Sonoma Bach's performance next weekend at our very own Green Music Center to at least eight different sing-along Messiahs. There's one in a brewery in LA called the Mess-Cider.

And we might wonder: what is it about *Messiah* that strikes such a nerve? It's magnificent, hummable music of course, but so is everything else Handel wrote. I think the difference is that *Messiah* goes deep. It's not just a story of one episode of scripture like his oratorios about the Exodus or the life of Samson. It's the whole thing. *Messiah* is often thought of as a Christmas work and performed at Christmastime, but really the Christmas part with its beautiful movements like "For unto us a child is born" is just Part I.

Part II tells the story of the crucifixion, not through biographical details about Jesus standing before Pilate or picking up his cross but through texts of Old Testament prophets that connect Jesus' specific suffering with archetypal, universal suffering: "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief." "All we like sheep have gone astray, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." "All they that see him laugh him to scorn." In *Every Valley* Charles King tells the story of Susannah Cibber, the alto soloist for the first performances of *Messiah*, who had been ostracized after a sexual scandal and mistreatment by her husband. Her career was rehabilitated by her moving, vulnerable performance, as audiences heard the connection between her own suffering and these words of universal suffering. And then the resurrection too is told not through the historical vignettes of the empty tomb but as a cosmic drama: "Let all the angels of God worship him" and "Thou art gone up on high; thou hast led captivity captive" and of course the most famous movement of all, with only one word as its text: "Hallelujah."

Then Part III moves into connecting that triumph with our own individual stories and God's promise to us in our own death: "I know that my Redeemer liveth"; "The trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible and we shall be changed"; and finally a glimpse of the heavenly choir singing "Worthy is the Lamb to receive blessing and honor and glory and power forever and ever."

It's a work with enough scope to take in the world as it was in Handel's time, and our world as it is in ours, with all its suffering and all its sin, and still to point to a world as it could be—and we can insist—as it will be. This Advent, for a spiritual practice, we could do worse than listen to the words of *Messiah* and let the words of the prophets ring through us. And then look around us, at this beautiful and beloved world, and wonder: where is the way of the Lord being prepared? Where is what is low being raised up, and what is high being cast down, and what is rough being made smooth, so that all flesh can know the salvation of God?