

THE MUSIC OF CHRISTMAS
Every Valley—The Glory of Handel’s “Messiah”
Isaiah 40:1-11

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/every-valley-the-glory-of-handels-messiah/>

Janet and I were blessed to attend Cantorum’s (our community chorale) Christmas concert last night. What a blessing. It reminded me of the power of music. Let’s think about the power of music. Our strongest emotions and commitments cannot be expressed in words. Music takes us further and deeper. What if someone invoked a rule—no Christmas music? What would that be like? What life-transforming truths might we discover about God’s love and care if we paid more attention?

I’m telling you—music makes a difference! A British publication recently reported a school in England, mostly underprivileged children, badly missing the national standards in reading and math. The school added six hours of music per week to its curriculum and scores went up dramatically in all areas! I’m here to tell you. Who knows the limits of music? I could get excited and be forgiven for thinking that music might make the farmer’s crop yield higher, help the Chiefs start winning again and maybe even get Democrats and Republicans in D.C. to hold hands and sing “Kumbaya.”

Each week during the remainder of Advent, we will take familiar Christmas music and try to hear it with fresh ears. George Frederick Handel was born in Germany in 1685. When he was 11, he was playing the organ. At 18, he composed an opera. He composed “Messiah” in a brief, frantic period, less than a month. When he finished “The Hallelujah Chorus,” Handel told someone, “I think I saw heaven open and I saw the very face of God.” “Messiah” debuted in Dublin, Ireland in 1742. As the anticipation of the premiere grew, the publicity encouraged women not to wear hoop skirts, in order to make more room for seating people! (That’s a good rule for our Christmas Eve service, ladies!). There was a huge crowd at that debut, and they were mesmerized by the haunting string overture, and with the piercing opening line, “Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people.”

“Comfort” is the first word in Isaiah 40. This is both our evangelistic task and our pastoral care one. Comfort, to give hope. This is our season, believers. Our story of Jesus. And we hear the call to clear the obstacles, to make the way easier (not harder). When a king would visit a village, they would work to fill potholes, pebbles, rocks and sticks. To smooth out rough places. Perhaps Isaiah was also thinking about the royal highway, between Babylon and Jerusalem. Every valley; every mountain. There is a great leveling coming.

Author Marilynne Robinson has pointed out that the Bible seldom praises God without also mentioning God’s tendency to overthrow existing order and makes things right. God disrupts existing order [*The Givenness of Things*, p. 199]. And if that was true in Isaiah’s day, how much more on this side of the resurrection?

This is what we tell those who are sexually or physically abused, excluded, discriminated against, caught in addiction, self-hate, guilt-ridden, wounded, neglected, lonely, homeless, war-torn, spiritually lost, empty. “Every valley will be exalted...” God is going to win; get on God’s side. We are to stop fixating on unreliable humans and rely on God, His Son Jesus Christ. “Here is your God” (v. 9). We are to tell them not to be afraid (v. 9). But we don’t just tell this Good News. We are to sing it (v. 9). The power of the song!

I love the story, “How The Grinch Stole Christmas” by Dr. Seuss. Remember? “Every Who down in Who-ville liked Christmas a lot...But the Grinch who lived just north of Who-ville did NOT!” Every Christmas, the who’s would do something that the Grinch hated most of all. They would “stand close together, with Christmas bells ringing. They’d stand hand-in-hand. And the Whos would start singing! And the more the Grinch thought of this Who-Christmas-Sing, the more the Grinch thought, “I must stop this whole thing! Why, for fifty-three years I’ve put up with it now! I MUST stop this Christmas from coming! But HOW?”

There is a darkness in our land that would steal Christmas. It is despair and hate. It would say evil is too strong. And this darkness has one goal. To keep us from singing our faith. But God is calling His church to sing. Sing boldly. “Comfort my people. Fear not. Every valley shall be exalted and every hill brought low...Here is your God!”