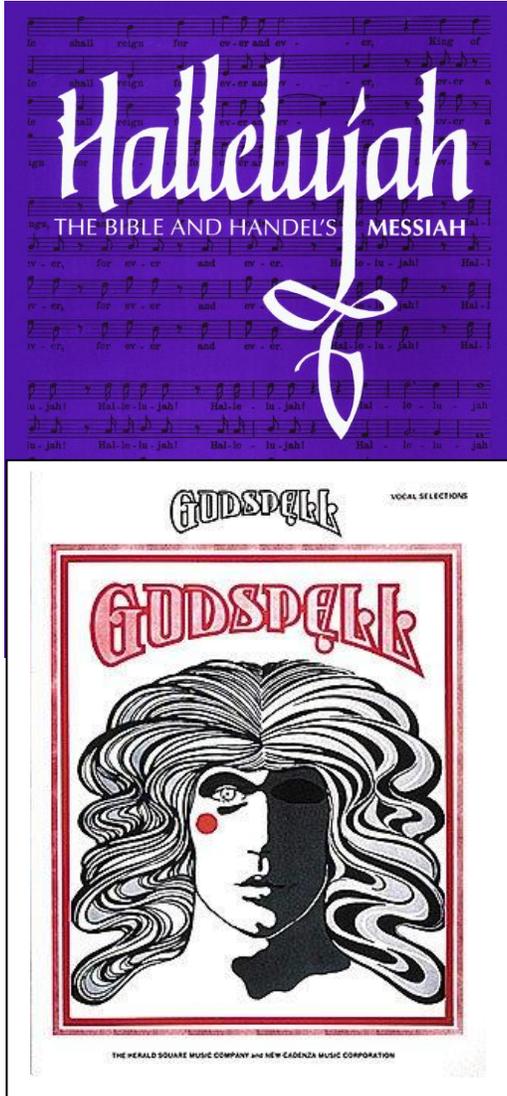


Christ Church Episcopal, Harwich Port, MA
Sermon for December 9, 2012, Advent 2C
Judith Davis, Rector
Luke 3:1-6



Two musical oratorios remind me of today's Gospel passage from Luke and its references to Isaiah, chapter 40. The first is from 1742, Handel's *Messiah*. Chapter 40 of Isaiah opens with words of comfort for God's people in exile with the familiar words of the opening tenor recitative of Handel's *Messiah*, sung in the words of the KJV:

Comfort ye, comfort my people, saith your God; speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned.

Then immediately a second recitative is sung by the tenor with these words: "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness: prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Then the tenor sings the wonderful aria, "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low: the crooked straight and the rough places plain" and we can just see the highway being built for the King, the Messiah to come.

Finally Isaiah chapter 40 verse 5 says, "And the glory of the lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the lord hath spoken it."

The passages quoted in today's gospel from Isaiah are so familiar to those of us who have sung Handel's *Messiah* all our lives. We can't hear those verses read in church without singing them in our minds, even if we ourselves did not sing the tenor solo. They're part of the fabric of our lives, somehow, and our well-worn and dog-eared copies of the score of *Messiah* bears witness to this. So, some of us are studying the

bible and Handel's *Messiah* this Advent. More of you are certainly welcomed—Wednesday mornings 9am to 10:30am.

The second “oratorio” is *Godspell*, written in our own time and called “a musical”. Perhaps you remember various performances of *Godspell* or maybe you sang in it. I love it when the tenor breaks the silence in *Godspell* by singing from the back of the room those chilling, yet powerful opening notes, unaccompanied; ‘prepare ye the way of the Lord’ Often the theatre is darkened and we hear those plaintive, opening notes and we know something wonderful will happen.

What does this passage call us to anyway, in our day, even now? The writer of Second Isaiah prophesied in the 6th century BCE during the time of the Babylonian exile. The Gospel writer Luke lived in the last years of the first century in the Common Era. Handel lived in the mid 1700's. Stephen Schwartz wrote the lyrics for *Godspell* in 1971. And even before *Messiah* was composed and written, Anglicans were familiar with the seasonal readings from Isaiah. So, it was no wonder then that Charles Jennens, who was Handel's librettist for *Messiah*, chose these seasonal readings to tell the story of God's Messiah and of John the Baptist who would prepare the way.

But let's talk about the original context of the passage from Isaiah that Luke quotes. “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness: prepare ye the way of the Lord.” God's people were in exile and now a beneficent king Cyrus of Persia, a pagan, would free the Hebrew people, after 40 years in exile, to return to Jerusalem and the people would prepare for that day when God's Messiah would travel on the highway prepared for him to lead the people home.

We too are called by Isaiah and John the Baptizer and these wonderful musical versions of these scripture lessons to prepare—to prepare our hearts to make room for God, to prepare our hearts to carry out the mission of the gospel—to care for others and make the world a place of love and peace.

In every Advent season we are offered the opportunity to reflect on our journey and to make sure that we are going in the right direction. We have a unique opportunity to recommit ourselves to a vision of God's reign and then focus our attention on Christ's second coming. Each of us individually has these few precious weeks to prepare again, to make room in our hearts for Christ, and to repent.

Advent therefore is a season which offers us the opportunity to pray for Christ's return and prepare for his second coming, when the world as we know it will end and creation as God intended it is brought to fruition.

And so in this second Sunday in the season of Advent we focus our attention on the prophetic voice of John the baptizer who invites us to live prepared for Christ's second coming. How we ask? And John answers, "Repent." Now there was a time when to repent implied expressing deep sorrow and regret for our sins. With this understanding in mind, Advent, cloaked in purple, became much like Lent, a second penitential season. But in our day theologians have rightfully turned Advent into a contemplative season cloaked in blue, a season in which we are invited to contemplate future possibilities and how we might live faithfully between the times, between Christ's first and second comings, between the already and the not yet of God's new creation.

To repent, therefore, must have a new and different meaning than it once did, namely, to reflect on the direction we are traveling both as faithful persons and as the Body of Christ, the church, and change course when necessary. Repentance in Greek means change. Change is not possible, of course, if we believe that we are already living completely faithful lives. Besides, we don't like change. Repentance begins with the acknowledgement that everything isn't as it could be. We have been blown off course like a sailor might be, and need to make a course correction.

It is with God's good news ringing in our hearts that we will be enabled and empowered to live faithfully with anticipation and hope between Christ's first and second comings. So let us hear the hymns and anthems and oratorios of the season and listen for those words that change our hearts, those words that help us prepare for Christ's coming into our lives. May we choose to make this Advent holy by slowing down and using these few weeks to ponder where we are headed and make changes in our course, or as John the baptizer put it, "Repent," that is, "live prepared."

John the Baptizer's message of repentance and baptism prepared people for the coming of Jesus Christ, God's Messiah, at a particular moment in history in the first century BCE. The people of Isaiah's day were also in a particular moment in history as the Babylonian exile was ending and they would be able to return to their homeland. But these words are also relevant for us. Day by day, Messiah comes to us as well, along the same metaphorical highway and part of our journey with Jesus is to keep that highway clear for him and to keep our hearts always ready to receive him and to reflect his love to the world. As you look at the wonderful Christmas lights in

our towns in the evenings, let us give thanks that the Light of Christ is coming into our hearts again this season that we might show that light to the world. Prepare your hearts for that brightness and be ready for it to come when you least expect it.

Let us pray. Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and to prepare the way for our salvation, give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[some of these thoughts were offered by Dr. John Westerhoff at *Day 1* (formerly the Protestant Hour): http://day1.org/4361-live_prepared]