

Be Glad for What You Get!

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

Believe it or not, Handel's oratorio, the Messiah, debuted at Easter. At Easter of 1742, at the Musick Hall in Dublin, Ireland, Handel conducted the orchestra for the piece's premier. The audience was standing room only; women attending had been asked not to wear hoops in their skirts so as to, "make room for more company." But the big crowd had not come to hear Handel's new composition. They had come because the lead female singer, contralto Susannah Cibber, had just gotten divorced and they were, after all, in heavily Catholic Ireland. Her husband demanded the divorce following her scandalous affair with, yes, the lead tenor, Patrick O'Malley.

Within two years Church of England music leaders recognized that the Messiah's true spot on the calendar was Christmas. The oratorio has been performed during Advent every year since 1752 at the Royal Albert Music Hall in London. Isaiah 40:3-5 serves as the text for an early movement in it. Tenor O'Malley would have sung a solo on verse 3, then the entire chorus would have chimed in with verses 4 and 5, with artful repeats that function like a Bach recitative. (Though contemporaries and both German by birth, Handel and Bach never met.) "Every valley...shall be exalted." And "the rough places plain," have become part of the background music for western Christmas celebrations ever since. But what does Isaiah's prophecy actually foretell?

Commentator John McKenzie calls Isaiah 40:1-11 a messianic prophecy. That is, these verses predict the eventual arrival of God on earth, bringing comfort and peace. “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended.” If only that were true today! But this prophecy does not apply to human geopolitical events. It applies, rather, to God's eternal purposes, to what God intends still to do. We interpret this and many other Old Testament prophecies to have seen their *partial* fulfillment in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He came as the Messiah, we believe. He claimed this identity in various ways. For one, he often referred to himself as a shepherd. As Isaiah said, “(the Lord God) will feed his people like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.” But the completion of this prophecy still awaits his return. As we wait, one spiritual discipline we ought to practice is being thankful.

Isaiah 40 combines two of the common messianic themes: power and compassion. The prophet who wrote these words lived about 540 years before Jesus' birth. Yet his visions can seem almost eerie in their ability accurately to predict the nature of the Messiah. Other religions lacked a picture of a compassionate God. They tended to focus on the powers of their gods. A couple of weeks ago we read of Jesus' reaction when he and his disciples tried to get away from the crowds, but failed. Matthew tells us his “heart was moved”. Where you or I might roll our eyes and sigh with exhaustion, he had *compassion* for all those people who had trekked out into the wilderness to listen to him preach. When Isaiah says the Messiah will “feed his flock”

we can take his meaning in two ways. Jesus miraculously multiplied a few loaves and fish to feed their stomachs. And he preached the Word of truth to feed their souls.

I would like a show of hands. How many here today have ever attended a Methodist Church? While other denominations lay closer to us Presbyterians theologically, the Methodist and Presbyterian worship services are virtually indistinguishable. In fact, the difference may come down only to one word in the Lord's Prayer: trespasses instead of debts. The Methodist Church grew out of the Church of England in the 1720's and '30s. The Methodist name started as a derisive taunt. Those who followed its way were said to be "methodical in their devotions". Fanatical in their spiritual practices. They worshiped and sang with far greater fervor than did the staid old Church of England. But that fervor made the Methodists the most numerous of any Protestant denomination world-wide. Drive across the American Midwest and note to what denomination each church you see belongs. You will see more Methodists than any other church.

Our opening hymn today, Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus was written by Charles Wesley. Wesley and his brother John were key figures in the rise of Methodism. They participated in its origins at Oxford College and gave it intellectual standing. They even served as missionaries to the American colony of Georgia. But Charles Wesley suffered from what they then called "melancholy" (today we would call it depression or possibly a bi-polar condition). He returned to England after just a few months. But while still on this side of the ocean he had a spiritual experience, which

he wrote felt as though, “the Lord himself were whispering in my ear.” The words for a hymn came to him as a whole. He claimed he wrote its two verses in less than half an hour. When he returned to England an organist friend noticed the meter of his verses fit the well-known hymn tune Hyfrydol. And we sang it this morning.

Over the next few years Charles Wesley was able to put his “melancholy” away. In a sermon he explained that one spiritual practice kept his demons at bay. What was that practice? Gratitude. When he had written Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus he claimed to have knelt in prayer, giving thanks to God for its creation. He found a sense of peace in his heart he could not remember having felt before. We might learn from this experience of Wesley's. Margaret Clem has. I have her permission to say what comes next. Margaret belongs to this church. She is blind. She lives at Sycamore Manor. She is a legend. Every staff member I have ever spoken to about her is in awe of her strength and positivity. She knows dozens of poems by heart—both ones by the likes of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Frost, and ones she herself wrote. And she has a powerful faith in Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior. I have told several people that when I feel melancholy I try to visit Margaret. She never fails to lift my spirits.

Margaret practices the spiritual discipline of gratitude. She intentionally and consistently thanks God for her blessings. As we make our way through Advent, do we see the approach of Christmas as an onrushing train, carrying with it a crushing load of obligations, or do we stop...breathe...and give thanks for the birth of our

Savior? The Gospel of Mark lacks mention of Jesus' life before his baptism as an adult. It is as if Mark feels a sense of urgency to get to what he thinks matters. He begins his Gospel by quoting not just part of today's passage from Isaiah, but also conflating it with a quote from Micah, another Old Testament prophet. He makes it clear he (Mark) sees John the Baptist as the embodiment of these prophecies. And he is thankful for it. Throngs must have felt the same; they made the arduous trek down more than 4,000 feet in elevation from Jerusalem to the River Jordan to get baptized by John—and the even more arduous trek back up those 4,000 feet.

John the Baptist was an odd duck. His diet and manner of dress set him apart. They also raised the thought in the minds of the people that he was an authentic man of God. I do not suggest it was a shtick, a trick, a way of drawing attention to himself. As I read the four Gospels he comes across as not particularly caring how others see him. He certainly pulls no punches verbally. The most important message he proclaims in our passage comes at its end. The Holy One is coming. The One of whom Isaiah and Micah wrote. I am not worthy to untie his sandal. (Remember that the Jews considered feet disgusting and unclean—and for the most part, they were!) “No,” John says, “I baptize with water; but he will baptize with the Holy Spirit.” Immediately after our verses Jesus gets baptized by John. And that Spirit appears in the form of a dove.

No words can adequately describe any face of God, not the Creator, nor the Redeemer nor the Sustainer. But that last term is how we often name the Holy Spirit.

At the risk of being facile, of reducing a complicated truth to less than its full meaning, I have come to calling the Holy Spirit “God at work here and now.” I once watched another pastor give a children's moment in which she held her own baby. The child may have been three or four months old. One by one, she had the older children stand up and smile into her baby's face. And without fail, that baby smiled right back. Given my own family's recent history I can say there may be no more powerful evidence for a loving God's existence than a baby's smile. And I believe the Spirit is in that moment.

I believe the Spirit brings peace into the hearts of the terminally ill. I believe the Spirit inspired the church's method of observing Advent and Christmas. I believe the Spirit moves people to give in service to the ministry of Christ. I believe the Spirit spoke into the ears of the authors of not just hymns, but indeed of the Bible. I believe that God is at work here and now in myriad ways. I am grateful. And that gratitude makes life a wondrous thing even in the midst of pain. Jesus has baptized us with the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God! Let us be thankful for what we have received.