

Prelude to the Messiah

Meditation Preached at Foundry United Methodist Church

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15 December 2002

This morning I want to share just a few words and then have a prayer as we prepare our hearts to receive the gift of this musical sermon - The Messiah.

George Frederick Handel was having a difficult year in 1741. It may have been the low point of his life. His latest opera had failed. The Italian opera company that he had brought to London had been disbanded. Queen Caroline had died and it had been her who had given him many commissions over the years of his life. That work had all but dried up. His health was failing. A stroke had left him partially paralyzed on his left side, and it seemed to be affecting his music. Handel wondered whether it was the end of his career.

Charles Jennens, a fan, who had become a friend - who shortly afterwards was to no longer be Handel's friend - sent him a list of scripture that he had arranged that was mostly just lifted from the suggested readings in the Book of Common Prayer. Jennens had taken the scriptures for Christmas and Good Friday and Easter and had arranged them in three parts and had entitled the resulting libretto The Messiah.

Handel, because of his despair, was really not planning to do any writing in 1741. But he sat with these scriptures that Charles, his friend, had sent him and he read through them. In his own sadness and despair, he read them again and again. In the midst of reading them he said "It was suddenly as though I did think the heavens had opened and I saw God himself."

Out of that experience he began to write. He wrote for 22 days with very little sleep. At the end of 22 days, he had produced The Messiah.

In one sense it's not much of a libretto. It's just some scriptures picked out of the Book of Common Prayer. But something about the place that Handel was in his own life and something about how those scriptures spoke to the place in his own life Handel was caused him to dig deep inside himself into virgin territory that had never been touched in his soul before.

As is always the case, out of that virgin place inside of himself was born The Messiah.

May all of us use the hard times in our life to go to new depths within ourselves that have never been touched before so that in those places the Messiah, the Christ, may be born.

Let us pray: We offer to you, Oh God, our ears and then our hearts and our minds and our spirits that, as we listen now, you might reach down into untouched places within ourselves and be born anew. Amen