

Day 27: *Messiah*: Comfort Ye, Comfort Ye My People

Dec. 24

*Comfort ye
Comfort ye my people
Comfort ye
Comfort ye my people
Saith your God
Saith your God*

*Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem
Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem
And cry unto her
That her warfare
Her warfare is accomplished
That her iniquity is pardoned
That her iniquity is pardoned*

*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*

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. (Isaiah 40:1)

The masterwork of George Frederic Handel is *Messiah*. It features three movements, the first of which celebrates Christmas. After the opening orchestral piece, which is written in a minor key to set a mood of hopeless despair, a tenor steps forward to sing. The lyrics are drawn directly from the first three verses of Isaiah 40, offering the first glimmer of hope from heaven to a broken world. God is about to do something marvelous that will comfort his people. Though they have experienced warfare and desert dryness, “her iniquity is pardoned.”

This prophecy brought God’s people Israel a glimmer of hope. From this tiny beginning, *Messiah* unfolds until at last reaching its climax in the famed *Hallelujah Chorus*, when all the promises of God are complete. And that is where we find ourselves – between the promised coming that was realized at the original Christmas, and the still-future promised coming again. It is then that the whole universe will echo the hallelujahs that we sing now in anticipation of his return.

So how are we to live in this interim period?

When *Messiah* premiered, it was not in London or Paris or any of the great musical capitals of the world, but in Dublin, Ireland. A strange locale, to be sure! In a sense it mirrored the birth of Jesus himself, who was born in an obscure village rather than a major metropolis.

As the day for the first concert approached, Dublin was hopping with excitement. In fact, demand was so high for tickets that the ladies were asked to forego hoops in their skirts, and the gentlemen to leave their swords at home – to make more seating space available. More than 700 packed into the city’s largest music hall to attend the premier.

Why Dublin, you ask? Handel had been commissioned to come to Dublin to conduct a

series of concerts, the proceeds of which would go to three charities: two were hospitals and the other provided relief for those in debtors' prison. That's right, in those days, you could be thrown into prison for falling into debt. And it was no easy thing to endure or gain release.

Messiah's opening solo is sung by a tenor, who voices the words of Isaiah, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." And that is exactly what our Messiah Jesus came for, to bring us comfort. Those who are infirm, or sick, or in prison to sin – he came to set us free.

The proceeds from that first performance in Dublin provided medical attention for scores of sick people. Additionally, prison doors were opened, and 142 souls walked away, free. How fitting is that! When *Messiah* arrived, the sick were healed and prisoners liberated. When our one true Messiah appeared, he also provided healing to a hurting, broken world and he opens prison doors, loosing the chains of sin and death, that we might freely follow Him.

At the end of the original text of his *Messiah*, Handel wrote three letters: SDG. They stand for *Soli Deo Gloria*, Latin for: "To God alone the glory." Our hope, our comfort begin with the humble child born in Bethlehem. He alone brings healing and restoration, freedom and inclusion.

"Glory to God alone!"

Questions

1. Where do you turn for comfort?
2. What is required for you to walk away from imprisonment to sin and death?
3. What are two or three ways you can participate in the Messiah's work of healing and setting people free?

Prayer

Jesus, sometimes still, the world looks bleak. Sometimes I feel virtually imprisoned by my own bad choices. But then I hear the call of one crying in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord." I long for your touch – today and every day. Come, Jesus, and open the highway that takes me from the desert into the courts of heaven. I pray in your name. Amen.