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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Texts: Isaiah 40: 1-5, 9-11; Haggai 2: 6-7; Malachi 3: 2; Job 19: 25

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### A Refiner's Fire

*"You must understand that your pain is trivial except insofar as you can use it to connect with other people's pain."*

*-James Baldwin, "The Artist's Struggle for Integrity"*

This is the last sermon I'll be offering this year. Now, for some of you – I hope not too many! – that may itself be a cause for Christmas cheer. But it's put me in a reflective mood, thinking about the year we've just passed together. It's been filled with a great many challenges. What we as ministers have delivered from the pulpit has always attempted to confront those challenges head on. Whether a pandemic or an insurrection, climate catastrophes or the rise of neo-white supremacy, we've grappled with it all, doing our best to connect the struggles of the day with the ancient wisdom of the Scriptures. For me, by far, the most powerful, and haunting, aspect of our meditations this year was our Wheels of Justice series. The subtitle of that series was "Stories from the Deep North," where we explored the legacy of enslavement and resistance in Southern New England, a legacy that continues to define us to this very day. It all still lives online if you missed it, or if you'd like to watch it again – seven weeks of site visits to nearly 15 locations in our region that crystallize the ethical and spiritual challenges – and opportunities – that we all face.

Today I'd like to revisit those themes one more time, though now through the prism of Advent and Christmas. Here's what's on my mind. Every year at this time, certain well known biblical phrases and texts circulate in churches, and often in popular culture as well. They're phrases like "Comfort ye my people," and "Every valley shall be exalted," both lifted from the book of Isaiah. They're phrases like "O Thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up into the high mountain" and "He shall gather his flock like a shepherd, and he shall gather the lambs in his arms," also drawn from Isaiah. There is the phrase "But who may abide the day of his coming," and "He is like a refiner's fire," taken from the prophet Malachi. And of course, there is "For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given," drawn, once again, from the book of Isaiah. All those phrases, used in liturgies and written on greeting cards, have the distinction of being used in Handel's great oratorio, the *Messiah*. Whether we're aware of it or not, those phrases, and Handel's *Messiah*, work as a kind of cultural surround during the season of Advent. They're omnipresent, even if we're not processing the words, or Handel's songs, on a conscious level.

Today I'd like to use Handel's *Messiah*, and the biblical texts that he incorporated into his oratorio as the set piece for my reflections. Here's what I want to know: who are the people, finally, to whom comfort is promised during Advent? What are the valleys, those depressed and hollowed out features of human life, that are to be raised? To whom are the good tidings of Zion proclaimed? And how, at last, might we hear those terrifying words from the prophet Haggai, who receives little attention other than during Advent: yet once a little while, and I will shake the heavens and the earth? Are those words intended for us? Or are they meant for others, who might

need them far more than we do? What would it mean to reframe those promises and proclamations, delivered annually in Handel's *Messiah*, and to hear them in a different way?

Before delving into those questions, allow me to put myself on the line by confessing my abiding love for Handel's *Messiah*. It's been a continuous through-line in my life. When I was a child my parents insisted that our family hear it live during many holiday seasons. When I briefly took voice lessons in high school, the first songs I was given to try were some of the baritone solos from the *Messiah*. When I graduated from high school one of the gifts I received from my dad, was a hardcover copy of the score, a gift I still treasure. During our early years of marriage, Rachael and I tried to attend a performance of the *Messiah* every year. A few years ago, I shared the story of taking our kids to hear Cappella Cantorum perform the *Messiah* over in Deep River. Do you remember what happened? They were younger then, and Augie and Elsa were zoned out, coloring. But they must have been paying attention, because in that split second pause of silence at the end of the Hallelujah chorus, Augie hollered from his seat "BOO-YAH!" I love hearing Handel's *Messiah* at this time of year. Not only that: I love Carleen's infectious enthusiasm for the work, sharing her insights and passion for it with us every year, and I love it when our choir offers selections from it, as they've been doing these over the past month. It's an ingenious work.

But it turns out that the *Messiah* has a troubling backstory, one that we do well to consider. Eight years ago, a musicologist at the University of Texas discovered a signature on a 1720 investment in the Royal Africa Company, one of Britain's two major slave trading firms. The signature belonged to none other than George Friedrich Handel.<sup>1</sup> Handel wasn't the only investor listed on the document. The lead investor was one of Handel's patrons, the Duke of Chandros, who had commissioned the oratorio *Esther*. The classical music aficionados among us may know that *Esther* is widely considered to be the first English oratorio. Not only that, fully a third of the Royal Academy of Music's board members had also invested. That may not have been a coincidence – Handel was the Academy's orchestra conductor at the time. But it also turns out that Handel had investments in the other British slaving firm as well, the South Seas Company. It turns out that Handel used the capital and interest on those investments to cover the losses of his operas and oratorios throughout the 1730's. So there it is: the slave trade helped finance Handel's career as a composer. Not only that, the Trade was making merchants in London, Liverpool, and Bristol very wealthy, many of whom would have been among Handel's audiences. What are we to do with the fact that the slave trade helped to finance the career of the man who gave us some of classical music's most enduring works, and who also gave us the *Messiah*?

Hang onto that question for a little longer, because we also need to ponder the context in which *Messiah* was composed and then performed. Handel received the libretto for the oratorio in the summer of 1741, and he had finished composing the work by September of that year. Both the libretto and the score were composed from the center of what was then a great colonial empire. If *Messiah* was composed from the center, at the periphery of that empire, some important events were taking place in the British colonies that should affect how we hear songs like "Comfort Ye" and "Every Valley." Just prior to the composition of the *Messiah*, in 1739, the Stono Rebellion took place in the British colony of South Carolina.<sup>2</sup> At that time, it was the largest slave insurrection in the British colonies, and its aftershocks were felt both in the colonies – at the periphery – and in the governing centers of Britain. It occurred after some Congolese

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<sup>1</sup> Hunter, David, "Handel and the Royal African Company," published in *Musicology Now*, June 14, 2015. <https://musicologynow.org/handel-and-the-royal-african-company/>

<sup>2</sup> For information on the Stono Rebellion, see <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1p284.html>.

Africans attempted to free themselves by marching south to Spanish Florida, where the Spanish were promising emancipation to the enslaved as a way of destabilizing Britain's territorial control. They were soon intercepted and they put up a fight, resulting in the deaths of some 25 white colonists, and as many as 50 Africans.

That event sent shockwaves back to London. But it also resulted in another event, which took place in the British colonies two years later. In 1741, just as *Messiah* was being readied for the British public, a series of fires broke out in what is now lower Manhattan.<sup>3</sup> At that time, one in five New Yorkers was enslaved, and the Stono Rebellion had instilled an attitude of permanent suspicion and paranoia among the white population throughout the colonies. Tensions were at an all time high. No evidence has ever emerged to suggest that the fires were a slave revolt, but a mass hysteria quickly fell upon the city. Nearly 200 of the city's black male population was rounded up and imprisoned. During the early summer of 1741, the city conducted a series of trials that wound up convicting nearly a hundred individuals. Then, from May until late August, at precisely the time that Handel was composing the *Messiah*, 17 enslaved people were hanged, along with four indigent white laborers. 13 enslaved men were burned at the stake, and 70 more enslaved men were deported, sold back into slavery in the West Indies.

Now, there's no record suggesting that Handel knew of those events. He was a sophisticated and worldly man, and it's not unlikely that word would have reached him. Still, what he knew or didn't know is hardly the point. What I'm driving at is that the work was produced from the very center of an empire, and that it was meant to be heard by those who administered that empire, not by those who suffered its effects – not the indigenous at the margins of that empire, and certainly not the Africans that Handel and others turned a profit from. When the work premiered in Dublin, in 1742, it was precisely those colonial administrators and beneficiaries of empire who gathered to listen to it. That was no less true when the work premiered in London the following year, or when it finally made its way across the Atlantic in 1770, when it was performed in a New York tavern for the first time. Handel's *Messiah* spoke comfort first and foremost to those who had been afforded the greatest possible comfort in the world, and to those who reaped the greatest rewards.

So it is that we're confronted with a powerful tension, one not unlike that faced when reading other profound, but limited historical documents, like the Declaration of Independence, say, or the United States Constitution. On the one hand *Messiah*, like those other documents, is a work of inspired genius. On the other hand, it was and is the product of empire. Should we quit listening to it? Should we burn our scores? Or might there be a better way, where we affirm the genius of the work, even while holding its feet to a fire that the work itself has lit?

I choose the latter. I'm inspired to do so by a Canadian theater company that has brilliantly reimagined Handel's work for a new era. It's called *Messiah/Complex*, and you can watch it online – I've included details on how to find it on the back of the bulletin.<sup>4</sup> Each of the solos in *Messiah* is sung by people of color, by those of indigenous descent, or by immigrants. And each of the solos is performed in a setting appropriate to that person's cultural background. The effect is overwhelming, for it gestures toward the origin of the biblical texts. It is, after all, the greatest of all ironies that the words of the Hebrew prophets, and of the Gospels themselves, came to be associated with enslavement and colonization, with wealth and with its civilizing

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<sup>3</sup> Information taken from the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History at Yale University. "The New York Conspiracy of 1741," by Daniel Horsmanden. <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/new-york-conspiracy-1741>

<sup>4</sup> *Messiah/Complex* can be viewed at: <https://attheatre.com/upcoming/messiah-complex/>

power. Those texts were written by and for what Frantz Fanon called the wretched of the earth, for those who had a knee on their neck, for those being crushed by the empires of the world. The singers performing *Messiah/Complex* free us to encounter those words again, though now from a radically different vantage.

Let me describe a few of the most arresting moments. After a short symphonic introduction, we find ourselves looking at a shot of mountains just outside Vancouver, while a tenor named Spencer Britten sings those famous opening lines, “Comfort Ye My People.” Britten is Asian, with a family line originating in the Philippines and China. In a time when so much abuse has been hurled at people of Asian descent, the song reaches toward places it hadn’t reached before, offering comfort to a people who have been afforded scant comfort in recent days. But then the scene shifts, even as the music transitions toward “Every Valley Shall Be Exalted.” Suddenly, we’re with Britten again, but now in downtown Vancouver, in one of the city’s gay neighborhoods. There are rainbow flags everywhere, and Britten is strutting on the sidewalk in stiletto heels while he sings of valleys being exalted, of mountains and hills being made low, and of the crooked being made straight. It’s all done with a knowing wink, as a joyful and celebratory piece of camp. Using wit and irony, it’s a performance that manages to reclaim the essence of Isaiah’s texts for a new historical moment in which comfort is delivered to those in need of it, and where those who are too often leveled in the valleys of life are exalted as the very chosen of the Lord.

Here’s another: Jonathan Adams is an indigenous singer of Cree and Metis descent. When he begins singing “Thus saith the Lord, yet once a little while, and I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land,” he does so against the backdrop of an ecological disaster, as a factory belches smoke into the sky. Suddenly Handel’s music becomes an ecological parable about a planet on the brink, and we realize that the tornadoes and floods, the fires and the heatwaves we’re experiencing aren’t a far cry from the world envisioned by the prophet Haggai. Adams then continues to the next piece, “For he is like a refiner’s fire,” and we wonder if the many spasms of weather catastrophes are a call toward our own repentance, as we ourselves undergo a painful process of refinement, and, we hope, of reconciliation.

Or another: Leela Gilday is an alto soloist, descended from the Dene people, who lived in the Northwest Territories of Canada. She herself doesn’t identify as Christian, but maintains her own indigenous practices. And so in the aria, “I know that my redeemer liveth,” taken from the book of Job, she translated the words into her own native tongue – Dene. But she also translated the concepts, so that they would be meaningful in her own context. Gilday is depicted in the wilderness of the Northwest Territories, performing an unnamed ritual, where she affirms, “I know that the Creator lives. In earth, in water, in fire, in air. I know that the Creator lives.” It takes the essence of Job’s text, and Handel’s music, bringing it to stunning new life.

Here’s the last one I’ll mention. Diyet is a soprano from the Tutchone Region of Canada’s Yukon Territory. She is of mixed ancestry, being part Tutchone, but also part Tlingit and Japanese and Scottish. Initially, she resisted being a part of the project, saying that the *Messiah* felt like a part of a colonial and religious viewpoint that was alien to her and her people. But then she imagined singing “For Thou That Tellest Good Tidings to Zion,” in her own native language. And she imagined those good tidings as being delivered to her people, and specifically to her grandmother, living in a remote part of the Yukon Territory. She sings it as a celebration of good news delivered to a proud indigenous person, together with all the gifts they have been given. And it works. It is a joyful celebration that turns Handel on his head. But, says Diyet, “If Handel were alive today, I think he would dig it.” We can hope.

So where, finally, does this leave us? For starters, what I hope is that it leads you to find the time to watch *Messiah/Complex* sometime this season, and to see what it does to you. I hope it makes you rejoice. But if it feels strange (and it might), I hope it serves as an invitation to consider the deepest meaning of Advent and Christmas. Here I return to the place in which I began, with James Baldwin: “You must understand that your pain is trivial except insofar as you can use it to connect with other people’s pain.” The waiting, the watching, the hope that Advent engenders all hint at a certain degree of pain, for those who wait and watch and hope are seeking relief from something or other. And that’s true of us right now. We’re living through a painful moment, in which America, in which our institutions, and in which many of us have been called to account for our history, for our privilege, and for our patterns of exclusion. For many, that accounting has produced a kind of shudder, and the reaction has been to turn away, or to angrily deny the need for such an accounting in the first place.

But that’s not the way of Christ, nor is it the core of what it means to wait during Advent or to celebrate at Christmas. Christmas entails joy, but it also entails the refiner’s fire; Christmas delivers comfort, but it comes first and foremost to the least of these. Christmas brings good news, but it is the good news that all of life is hallowed, and not just ours; that all peoples and customs are worthy of celebration, and not only our own; that many histories are worthy of being uplifted, and not only the ones that narrate the story of the most privileged. The good news of Christmas is about recognizing that you, that we, are all bearers of the Christ child every bit as much as Mary. But it’s also about realizing that the essence of the story of Christ’s birth may be found in other forms as well, as in a Tutchone woman celebrating her people, or in a man proudly strutting in stiletto heels along a Vancouver street. This is what it means to undergo the refiner’s fire: to see the coming of good news in visions like that, as well as in the scenes we’ll shortly celebrate in this space and in our own homes. It’s a refinement that I, for one, wish to undergo. I hope you do too.