

INTRODUCTION

In Advent we reflect and celebrate the expectation and coming of Jesus as the Messiah, the Redeemer. The events surrounding His birth – and His ministry here on earth – have often been portrayed in music. For this small group series, we'll use one of the most well-known pieces of classical music as a pathway of engaging with, and deepening, our understanding of the biblical verses surrounding the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

George Frederick (or Frideric) Handel's ***Messiah*** belongs to the musical genre of *oratorio*. Like operas, oratorios are dramatic stories set entirely to music for soloists, choir or chorus, and orchestra. Unlike opera, oratorios do not include acting, costumes or stage scenery. Oratorios usually tell sacred stories drawn from the Bible or the lives of Christian saints. ***Messiah*** is a combination of the music of Handel and text compiled by Charles Jennens, which he took directly from the King James Version of the Bible, or the translation used in the Book of Common Prayer. The first part of the ***Messiah***, which we will explore in this series, takes us from the darkness of Israel's exile to the glorious, breaking light of the coming of Jesus Christ.

Handel's oratorio tells us of the *promise* of Messiah, the *coming* of Messiah, the *ministry* of Messiah, the *suffering, death*, and *resurrection* of Messiah, and of His *exaltation* and *eternal reign*. However, we never hear His name (Jesus) or His voice. Words of Scripture are used to tell the story in ways that point beyond the immediate meaning of the texts chosen.

All of the sessions will follow a similar structure: first, we will engage with specific biblical texts that form the foundation of the different movements, or scenes, of Handel's ***Messiah***. This will allow us to reflect on the setting and context of the music. We will then listen to portions of the ***Messiah***, which can be found in the accompanying videos to feel and understand how the composer perceived – and reflected on – these events. When Handel wrote the ***Messiah***, he is quoted as saying: *"I should be sorry if I only entertained them. I wish to make them better."* The composer challenges us to go beyond *feeling* good, to *becoming* good. Is our Advent about entertainment or edification? Diversion or direction? Amusement or awareness?

We invite you to let the music "speak" to you, and carry you to a deeper understanding and appreciation of what we remember and celebrate during Advent and Christmas. Like the written word, music is yet another medium of understanding and communication. Let this Small Group series serve as a vehicle to refocus our attention on what matters this season – the ***Messiah***.

COMFORT MY PEOPLE

Isaiah 40:1-5; Haggai 2:1-9

Overture
Comfort Ye My People
Ev'ry Valley shall be Exalted
And the Glory of the Lord
Thus Saith the Lord - PART 1

HE SHALL PURIFY

Malachi 2:13-14,17 and 3:1-4

Thus Saith the Lord - PART 2
But Who may Abide the Day of His Coming
And He shall Purify the Sons of Levi

GOD WITH US - BEHOLD YOUR GOD!

Isaiah 7:7-17 and 40:6-10

Behold, a Virgin Shall Conceive
O Thou that Tellest Good Tidings to Zion - P1

LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Isaiah 60:1-6 and 9:1-2

O Thou that Tellest Good Tidings to Zion - P2
For Behold, Darkness shall Cover the Earth
The People that Walked in Darkness

THE GOOD NEWS: A CHILD IS BORN

Isaiah 9:3-7; Luke 2:8-12

For Unto Us a Child is Born
Pastoral Symphony
There were Shepherds Abiding in the Field

GLORY TO GOD

Luke 2:13-20; Zechariah 9:9-10

Glory to God in the Highest
Rejoice Greatly, O Daughter of Zion

COME UNTO HIM

Isaiah 35:1-7; 40:10-11; Matthew 11:25-30

Then shall the Eyes of the Blind be Open'd
He shall Feed His Flock Like a Shepherd
His Yoke is Easy, His Burden is Light

AS YOU LISTEN

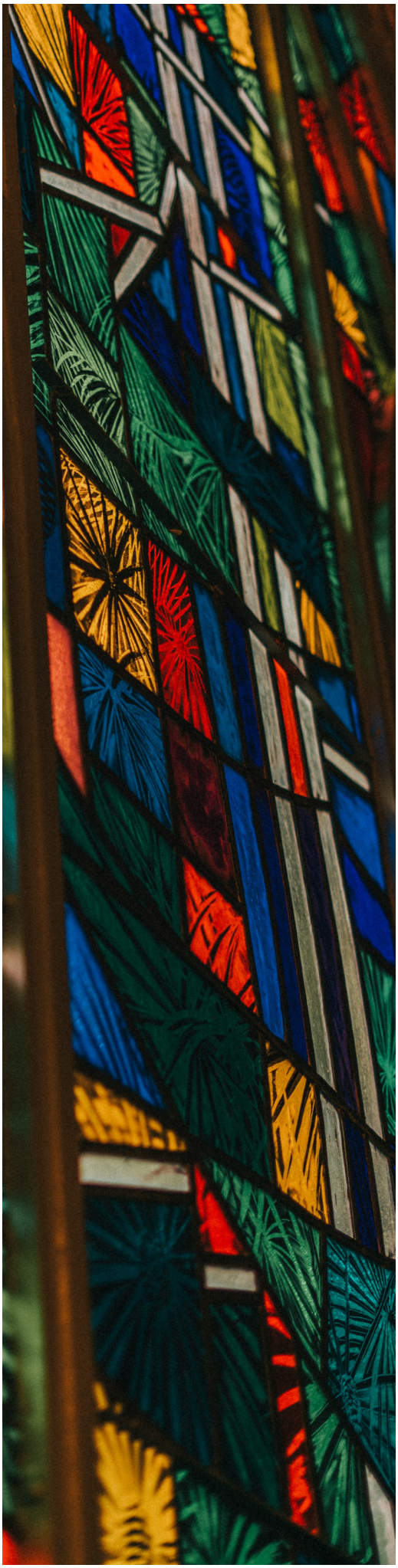
As you listen to each movement of the Messiah, pay attention to word painting and tone painting:

Word painting: *musical depiction of words in text. Using the device of word painting, the music tries to imitate the emotion, action, or natural sounds described in the text.*

Example: One of the most vivid examples of word painting can be heard in the movement, *Ev'ry Valley Shall Be Exalted*, where Handel expresses Isaiah's words "crooked" and "plain" with notes that are "crooked" and "plain". "Crooked" is sung to four fast moving and variable notes, while "plain" is elongated smoothly in one note. Another example can also be heard in this movement with the word "exalted", as the musical notes actually ascend on the musical scale, vocalizing the ascendancy of exaltation.

Tone painting: *The use of musical gesture(s) in a work with an actual or implied text to reflect, often pictorially, the literal or figurative meaning of a word or phrase.*

Example: Tone painting can be heard clearly in the movement, *For Behold Darkness Shall Cover the Earth*, where Handel contrasts the themes of light and dark. The phrase "For behold, darkness shall cover the earth," is low in range, minor, and dissonant, with ominously rustling sixteenth notes in the strings. The music then jumps to the bright key of D major as the voice sings, "but the Lord shall arise upon thee." The harmonies become consonant and the range, now higher, keeps rising. The piece modulates to a still brighter key, A major, and by the end of the final phrase, "the brightness of thy rising," the first violins have climbed to the highest note of the piece, and landed on a bright F# chord. Light has driven out darkness. The next movement, *The People That Walked in Darkness*, continues tone painting by evoking people walking in darkness by the aimless wandering melodic line and sparse texture. Most of the instruments are playing in octaves; they create no harmony. The music sounds empty, like the dark, barren wilderness in which the people are wandering.



COMFORT MY PEOPLE

Start your discussion by reading the Bible verses together, ideally out loud. Then discuss the corresponding commentary and questions. This will allow us to reflect on the setting and context of the words. Next, watch the provided video, which will contain all of the movements for this session. Discuss the second set of questions and be sure to allow enough time for both discussions.

SCRIPTURE

READ **ISAIAH 40:1–5**

Biblical and Historical Context and Commentary:

Isaiah 40 begins with words of comfort and assurance to those who felt separated and abandoned by God. The people, exiled from their homes, hear the voice of God through the prophet, speaking words of comfort. God once again claims them as *"My people."*

When the prophet speaks of making a desert highway, God is telling His people that He will lead them home on the most direct route possible (most travelers would follow the curvature of the Fertile Crescent, avoiding the desert). Handel uses these words to speak forward; foretelling the voice of John the Baptist, crying in the wilderness, announcing the coming of the Lord.

- Why are the Israelites experiencing this feeling of separation and abandonment? What has led to it?
- Think of a time when you felt alone or abandoned. What emotions came over you when you were reunited? What do you think it meant to the people to hear words of comfort and pardon from God?
- How could these feelings be similar to what we experience in communion with Jesus Christ?

As we read of *every valley being exalted*, and *every hill made low*, we are reminded of the words of Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1): *He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly*. Humanity will be equalized in the light of His glory and salvation. *The crooked shall be made straight; the rough places made* wide open and plain and God's glory will be revealed in this act.

- What crooked or rough places in your heart need to be straightened or made smooth? How is God's glory revealed when we overcome things like this?

READ **HAGGAI 2:1–9**

Biblical and Historical Context and Commentary:

We have a tendency to think of the past as better or more glorious than the present. The people returned to Jerusalem;

a depopulated land with a depressed economy, the temple in ruins, their ideas of *what was* almost haunting them as they tried to rebuild an entire society. Our verses come from Haggai, who is encouraging those trying to restore the temple. But the restoration work has not gone as planned, and the glories of the past seem destined to remain there. Haggai comforts the people, reminding them of the spirit of God moving in their lives and work, and that He will provide what the people need for the task at hand. This abiding spirit is the promise of divine presence and initiative among the people.

- In what ways have you looked to the past longingly? Is it possible that the past was not quite the way we remember it (*"the grass is always greener..."*)? Why?
- Why do you think Haggai encourages the people to look beyond what they can see physically?
- In verse 9, the Lord says, *"The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former."* Why does God push us to look forward?

MUSIC

LISTEN to the following segments of the Messiah together. During this time, make personal notes on your feelings and reflections in the spaces provided. If you have not engaged with music in this way before, do not feel discouraged; allow the questions below to guide you.

1. How would you describe the overall mood of each movement?
2. What emotions did you feel while you were listening? What images came to mind?
3. How did the music accompany the text? What did it add? Did you hear any word/tone painting?
4. What words were emphasized by the music? What did the music add to the Scriptural texts?
5. What new realization or deeper perspective has this discussion brought to your understanding of Jesus Christ?

1. Orchestra: *Overture*

The somber opening chords of the overture place us with the Israelites in darkness, exile, away from our roots, our identity taken away, with no hope for the present or future. But the musical line pushes forward with the opening of the *fugue*, presenting us with hope; a promise of God's faithfulness that is full of life, before once more resolving on a somber chord. But this final solemnity is not the same as when we started; something has changed. The last chord is confident in its hope – *God will act.*

2. Arioso: *Comfort Ye My People*

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.
Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem.
And cry unto her,
That her warfare is accomplished,
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.

3. Aria: *Ev'ry Valley shall be Exalted*

Ev'ry valley shall be exalted,
And ev'ry mountain and hill made low;
The crooked straight and the rough places plain.

One of the most vivid examples of word painting can be heard in the movement, *Ev'ry Valley shall be Exalted*, where Handel expresses Isaiah's words "crooked" and "plain" with notes that are "crooked" and "plain". "Crooked" is sung to four fast moving and variable notes, while "plain" is elongated smoothly in one note. Another example can also be heard in this movement with the word "exalted", as the musical notes actually ascend on the musical scale, vocalizing the ascendancy of exaltation.

4. Chorus: *And the Glory of the Lord*

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.

5. Recitative: *Thus Saith the Lord (Part 1)*

Thus saith the Lord, the Lord of hosts;
Yet once a little while and I will shake
The heavens and the earth,
The sea and the dry land.
And I will shake all nations;
And the desire of all nations shall come.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

When it comes to both Scripture and music, it has been said that you learn or find something new every time you come back to it. Take a few moments over the next week to reflect on the Bible reading and listen to the music again. What struck you differently this time around?

HE SHALL PURIFY

Start your discussion by reading the Bible verses together, ideally out loud. Then discuss the corresponding commentary and questions. This will allow us to reflect on the setting and context of the words. Next, watch the provided video, which will contain all of the movements for this session. Discuss the second set of questions and be sure to allow enough time for both discussions.

SCRIPTURE

READ **MALACHI 2:13–14** (stop at "For what reason?") **2:17, 3:1–4**

Biblical and Historical Context and Commentary:

Advent questions our worthiness, readiness, and willingness for Christ's coming. The prophet in Malachi questions the readiness of the people in receiving God in the temple since they are questioning His coming and doubting His activity (*Where is the God of justice?*), even sinning because God doesn't seem to be paying attention. But the Lord *will suddenly come to His temple.* These words could be taken as an assurance or a threat. *But who can endure the day of His coming?* This is the threat (see also Amos 5:18-19). Yet His coming in judgement is not destroying, but *refining*. This is the assurance; the people of God will be purified, represented by the sons of Levi, the priesthood.

Why are our lives in need of refining? How much will it hurt? What might I need to give up? Maybe these are questions that we ask ourselves. Like those Malachi was speaking to, we want to see the day of His coming, but perhaps we do not want to go through too much change or pain to see it happen. Malachi's words are not a free pass to attack or point fingers at others. *We* are the ones who are going to be refined; *we* are the ones in need of refining.

- What scares you about change?
- We often think of God only in terms of love and grace. What new characteristics do you think of when you hear God spoken of as a refiner?
- Review the VISION article, ***Tested by Fire***, and discuss the various aspects of refining and the parallels to our being transformed into the nature of Christ.

The final words of verse 3 again point forward: *that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness.* We know Jesus Christ is the only High Priest who gave a truly righteous offering to the Lord: *For this reason He had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in service to God, and that He might make atonement for the sins of the people* (Hebrews 2:17 NIV). We can *endure the day of His coming* through the salvation and grace of Jesus Christ.

MUSIC

LISTEN to the following segments of the Messiah together. During this time, make personal notes on your feelings and reflections in the spaces provided. If you have not engaged with music in this way before, do not feel discouraged; allow the questions below to guide you.

1. How would you describe the overall mood of each movement?
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5. What new realization or deeper perspective has this discussion brought to your understanding of Jesus Christ?

5. Recitative: *Thus Saith the Lord (Part 2)*

The Lord, whom ye seek,
Shall suddenly come to His temple,
Even the messenger of the Covenant,
Whom you delight in;
Behold, He shall come,
Saith the Lord of hosts.

6. Aria: *But Who may Abide the Day of His Coming*

But who may abide the day of His coming,
And who shall stand when He appeareth?
For He is like a refiner's fire.

In "the refiner's fire" section, the strings play feverishly fast repeated notes – marked ***prestissimo*** (meaning – ***in a very quick tempo***), Handel's fastest tempo marking – which occasionally dart upward like flames.

7. Chorus: *And He shall Purify the Sons of Levi*

And He shall purify the sons of Levi,
That they may offer unto the Lord
An offering in righteousness.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

When it comes to both Scripture and music, it has been said that you learn or find something new every time you come back to it. Take a few moments over the next week to reflect on the Bible reading and listen to the music again. What struck you differently this time around?

GOD WITH US - **BEHOLD YOUR GOD!**

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SCRIPTURE

READ **ISAIAH 7:7–17**

Biblical and Historical Context and Commentary:

Ahaz is the King of Judah and is being petitioned by Pekah, the King of Israel, and Rezin the King of Syria, to join an alliance with them against the King of Assyria who was trying to subjugate all of the smaller kingdoms. Ahaz didn't think they stood a chance, but was afraid that if he didn't join the alliance the other two kingdoms would stand against Judah. Through the prophet Isaiah, God assures Ahaz that he had nothing to fear from the alliance of Israel and Syria. God even offered a sign to Ahaz – the words of the next movement; *Behold, the virgin [young woman] shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Emmanuel, "God with us."*

Isaiah's words had historical fulfillment in his day: within a few months (*the time between conception and birth*) Judah's enemies had withdrawn; within three years (*the time it takes for a child to know right from wrong*) the kingdom of Israel was destroyed and within twelve years the nation of Syria was conquered by Assyria. These words also carry a prophetic fulfillment hundreds of years after Isaiah spoke them when Jesus, the Messiah, was born.

- Why is a birth such a hope-filled event?
- How have you found encouragement in Christ in difficult times?
- How have you experienced Jesus as "God with us"?

READ **ISAIAH 40:6–10**

Biblical and Historical Context and Commentary:

In the next movement, we are taken back to Jerusalem, also sometimes referred to as Zion, during the time of exile; the lonely city mourning its emptiness. We already heard the words of comfort in the beginning of the oratorio (Isaiah 40:1-5), which take three forms in the following verses: the desert highway (from the first session), the frailty of humanity (*All flesh is grass...*) contrasted with the eternality of God, and finally, the herald bringing the good news – *God is coming!*

As used by Handel, this herald's message refers to the coming of Jesus Christ, whose birth by a virgin mother has just been announced. In the coming of His Son, *God is with us*, here, on earth!

The words, "comfort, comfort" ring empty when there is no *discomfort*. Without the context of exile and separation, we may confuse this word of comfort with the sentiment of the season. We need to remember our frailty, weaknesses, and our need for God in order to truly hear the message of the herald. Advent is a time when we can repentantly name the places and things that take us far from God. Advent can be the herald, calling us back into God's presence to *behold our God!*

- What things take you far from God?
- What things in your life act as heralds, calling you back into the presence of the God?
- The herald in the Bible verse is told to *get thee up into the high mountain*, and *lift up your voice with strength*. How could you become more confident when telling others of Jesus' coming?

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8. Recitative: ***Behold, a Virgin shall Conceive***

Behold, a virgin shall conceive
And bear a son, and shall call
His name Emmanuel, God with us.

9. Aria: *O Thou that Tellest Good Tidings to Zion*

O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion,
Get thee up into the high mountain.
O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem,
Lift up thy voice with strength;
Lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah,
Behold your God!

This movement continues the narrative of the soloist who just announced the coming of Emmanuel, expressing the joy that this news brings. The music is exuberant, dance-like, and filled with upward leaps that illustrate the words: "get thee up into the high mountain," and "lift up thy voice."

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LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Start your discussion by reading the Bible verses together, ideally out loud. Then discuss the corresponding commentary and questions. This will allow us to reflect on the setting and context of the words. Next, watch the provided video, which will contain all of the movements for this session. Discuss the second set of questions and be sure to allow enough time for both discussions.

SCRIPTURE

READ **ISAIAH 60:1–6 AND 9:1–2**

Biblical and Historical Context and Commentary:

Again, Isaiah is referring to Jerusalem, or Zion, now pictured as one cast on the ground (Isaiah 51:17): *Arise, shine!* The prostrate one is commanded to rise, to shine, to glow with the light of God which is shining over them like the break of day (Isaiah 58:8).

The breaking light that Isaiah speaks of is one that illuminates every shadowed place, brings the path into view, gives direction, and drives out fear. He speaks of light and hope in a time of desolation. *Do not give up – God's light will break through!* Isaiah prompts us to see beyond things as they are and to imagine things as they might be. Don't lower your sights or get comfortable or satisfied with the status quo. Following the light will lead us to the source of light and life – ***Jesus Christ***. *In Him was life, and the life was the light of men* (John 1:4).

- Brainstorm the many different facets, characteristics, and uses of light. Then, discuss how Christ is your light.

The world before the coming of the true light (John 1:5, 9-10) was in darkness – *gross darkness*. But for Zion, *the Lord will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you, the Gentiles shall come to your light* (Isaiah 60:2-3). Old Simeon, in the temple at the time of Jesus' circumcision also recognized that this light was not just for the Jewish people: *For my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the faces of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel* (Luke 2:30-32). These words remind us that those on whom God's light shines are also intended to be themselves a gift – *a light to the nations.*

- The Bible verses, and the music, talk about people walking in darkness. Share a time when you were lost, or wandering in darkness (actually or figuratively).
- How can you be a light to others? What could you do this week?

MUSIC

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9. Chorus: *O Thou that Tellest Good Tidings to Zion*

Arise, shine, for thy light is come,
And the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.

10. Recitative: *For Behold, Darkness shall Cover the Earth*

For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,
And gross darkness the people;
But the Lord shall arise upon thee,
And His glory shall be seen upon thee.
And the Gentiles shall come to thy light,
And kings to the brightness of thy rising.

Tone painting can be heard clearly in the movement, *For Behold Darkness shall Cover the Earth*, where Handel contrasts the themes of light and dark. The phrase "For behold, darkness shall cover the earth," is low in range, minor, and dissonant, with ominously rustling sixteenth notes in the strings. The music then jumps to the bright key of D major as the voice sings, "but the Lord shall arise upon thee." The harmonies become consonant and the range, now higher, keeps rising. The piece modulates to a still brighter key, A major, and by the end of the final phrase, "the brightness of thy rising," the first violins have climbed to the highest note of the piece, and landed on a bright F# chord. Light has driven out darkness.

11. Aria: *The People that Walked in Darkness*

The people that walked in darkness
Have seen a great light;
And they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death,
Upon them hath the light shined.

This next movement, *The People that Walked in Darkness*, continues tone painting by evoking people walking in darkness by the aimless wandering melodic line and sparse texture. Most of the instruments are playing in octaves; they create no harmony. The music sounds empty, like the dark, barren wilderness in which the people are wandering.

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THE GOOD NEWS: A CHILD IS BORN

Start your discussion by reading the Bible verses together, ideally out loud. Then discuss the corresponding commentary and questions. This will allow us to reflect on the setting and context of the words. Next, watch the provided video, which will contain all of the movements for this session. Discuss the second set of questions and be sure to allow enough time for both discussions.

SCRIPTURE

READ **ISAIAH 9:3–7**

Biblical and Historical Context and Commentary:

The new light that the people have seen is a ruler. Isaiah's words here were most likely composed for the enthronement of a new king; *a Wonderful Counselor, a Mighty God* (godlike in might/divine hero), *an Everlasting Father* (his care for his people is perpetual), and *a Prince of Peace* (an end to warfare, *shalom*). As we continue reading, verse 7 reveals that, though Isaiah was speaking these words over a human king, he was expanding his thoughts to the coming Messiah; speaking of a messianic hope for a ruler worthy of David. The choir celebrates this Ruler who has come; this Child who was born, this Son who was given.

- Discuss the names of Jesus in Isaiah 9:6-7.
- Which words point to this promised One as a human being? What evidence is there that He will be different than a human being?
- Which of the four titles given to the Messiah in verse 6 fits Jesus best for you, as you know Him today? Which title seems most distant from your experience of Him?

Reading Isaiah 9:3-7, we must acknowledge that this prophecy is still unfulfilled. There is still oppression; peace and justice are not the rule of the land. We might, like John the Baptist, ask – "*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*" (Matthew 11:3). The Jewish people expected a Messiah who would free them from oppression, restore the kingdom and the temple, and bring in a reign of peace. Do we expect the Messiah to fix everything? It is an expectation which Jesus does not meet. He does not solve all our problems. Neither does He claim any of these titles from Isaiah. When He is questioned by Pilate, *"Are you the King of the Jews?"*, in all four gospels, Jesus says, *"You say so."* Those are your words, not Mine. However, both Mark and Matthew tell of an incident shortly before Jesus' crucifixion. During a dinner, a woman appears and anoints Jesus' head with oil. He is literally now the *Anointed One*, which is the meaning of the title *Messiah*. Yet, He doesn't accept this anointing as a King, but rather speaks of the ritual of anointing the dead: *She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial* (Mark 14:8). Jesus is the Messiah, but not one according to traditional expectations.

- What are your expectations of Jesus?

The promise of a child seems hardly the great sign awaited for by a people suffering in oppression. But this sign of new life is not ordinary. It is a sign that can only be from the Creator; the sign promised to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 12-21); the sign that the midwives protected during captivity (Exodus 1); the sign of God's promise to Ahaz (Isaiah 7:14). What is a more fitting sign of God's love than the creation of new life in the midst of a broken world?

READ **LUKE 2:8–12**

Biblical and Historical Context and Commentary:

Only Luke tells the story of the shepherds; the gospel that is insistent on Jesus' concern for the poor, the outcast, the lowest in society. In Jewish tradition shepherds were poor and hard-working people who lived outdoors with the sheep in the field. The angels burst into this ordinary day, with "Fear not!" for the shepherds were surely afraid, but followed quickly by the *good tidings of great joy*. Joy is a theme that frames Luke's gospel. Here, at Jesus' birth, the angel announces great joy to the shepherds who, after visiting the infant, return to the fields *glorifying and praising God* (Luke 2:20). At the end of the gospel, the disciples, after receiving Jesus' blessing before He ascended, return to Jerusalem with great joy, praising and blessing God (Luke 24:52-53). But the news of the angels is not just for the shepherds – *I am bringing you good news of great joy <u>for all people</u>!* Surely, we are among "all the people"? That is up to us. Will we receive this news with great joy?

- Why do you think Jesus was concerned for the poor and the outcast? How can you share in Jesus' concern for the poor this Advent season?
- Have you ever received a message from God? Share your experience.

MUSIC

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12. Chorus: *For Unto Us a Child is Born*

For unto us a child is born,
Unto us a son is given,
And the government shall be upon His shoulder;
And His name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor,
The mighty God, the Everlasting Father,
The Prince of Peace.

13. Orchestra: *Pastoral Symphony (or Pifa)*

The text of the oratorio has led us from the gloom of exile to the new hope of restoration in the coming of the Messiah. We must remove ourselves from the jubilant proclamation of the prophecy and settle down on the quiet hillsides around Bethlehem. The Pastoral Symphony helps us humble ourselves with the shepherds. The music is calm and sweetly lyrical. It breathes quietness into the evening before the angels arrive.

14. -16. Recitatives: *There were Shepherds Abiding in the Field*

There were shepherds abiding in the field,
Keeping watch over their flocks by night.

And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them,
And the glory of the Lord shone round about them,
And they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them,
"Fear not, for behold,
I bring you good tidings of great joy,
Which shall be to all people."

"For unto you is born this day
In the city of David a Savior,
Which is Christ the Lord."

This movement is unique in that it moves us from prophecy to history. Angels speak and sing to shepherds in a specific time and place. They tell of a baby born *this day in the city of David.*

PERSONAL REFLECTION

When it comes to both Scripture and music, it has been said that you learn or find something new every time you come back to it. Take a few moments over the next week to reflect on the Bible reading and listen to the music again. What struck you differently this time around?

GLORY TO GOD

Start your discussion by reading the Bible verses together, ideally out loud. Then discuss the corresponding commentary and questions. This will allow us to reflect on the setting and context of the words. Next, watch the provided video, which will contain all of the movements for this session. Discuss the second set of questions and be sure to allow enough time for both discussions.

SCRIPTURE

READ **LUKE 2:13–20**

Biblical and Historical Context and Commentary:

"Glory to God in the Highest" doesn't mean *in the highest way*, but rather, *in the highest places* – in heaven itself. God's glory is being sung in heaven, while His peace comes down to earth. When Jesus enters Jerusalem in the days preceding His crucifixion, Luke writes that the welcoming crowds echo the songs of the angels: *"Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"*

As we start the New Year, may we join the angels in their song of praise, looking forward to Jesus' return, when the words of the lyricist will ring true *...when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors flight, and the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing* (It came upon a midnight clear, verse 4).

- What reasons do you have this year to sing "Glory to God"?

Handel and Jennens cut the passage after the angels' proclamation, robbing us of the responses to their message. Each response gives us an example of how we could react to the *the good news;* the gospel. The heavenly choir responds with a song of glory, praising God. The shepherds bear witness to the message by announcing what they heard to others who are, in turn, amazed. At the end, the shepherds *glorify and praise God* for what they experienced. Mary offers a more quiet and personal response. She *treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.* The good news inspires both private wonder and public celebration. What is our response?

- Discuss the various responses to the "good news" and add your own.
- Another translation of Luke 2:14 reads: *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests.* On whom does God's favor rest? Everyone? A selected group? Why? Is it yet undetermined?
- What possible risks did the shepherds take to go see the Messiah? What drew them to take those risks? What does this tell us about our own "search" for God?

READ **ZECHARIAH 9:9–10**

Biblical and Historical Context and Commentary:

These words in Zechariah look back and forward. The words quote the dying Jacob with his sons around his deathbed. To Judah (the ancestor of David), he says, *"The scepter shall not depart from Judah... and the obedience of the peoples is his. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine..."* (Genesis 49:10-11). In his present time, the prophet is calling the city of Jerusalem (or Zion) to sing in celebration of a coming, victorious king. Looking forward, the words speak of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, on a donkey, and in the telling of this event, three of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and John) will quote them. The Messiah is the coming King who will proclaim peace to the nations of the world. The image of the donkey reinforces the idea of peace; donkeys were associated with life, being used on farms to grow food and in town to carry goods and people, while horses were associated with war.

- How do you personally express joy?

MUSIC

LISTEN to the following segments of the Messiah together. During this time, make personal notes on your feelings and reflections in the spaces provided. If you have not engaged with music in this way before, do not feel discouraged; allow the questions below to guide you.

1. How would you describe the overall mood of each movement?
2. What emotions did you feel while you were listening? What images came to mind?
3. How did the music accompany the text? What did it add? Did you hear any word/tone painting?
4. What words were emphasized by the music? What did the music add to the Scriptural texts?
5. What new realization or deeper perspective has this discussion brought to your understanding of Jesus Christ?

17. Chorus: *Glory to God in the Highest*

And suddenly there was with the angel,
A multitude of the heavenly host,
Praising God, and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest,
And peace on earth,
Good will towards men."

This chorus provides Handel with more opportunities for word painting. The immediately recognizable would include "glory" (bustling strings and trumpets) contrasting with "peace" (quiet unisons) and "God in the highest" (high range) contrasting with "earth" (low range and an octave leap down). Some think the musical treatment of "goodwill" sound like hearty shouts of "good cheer" accompanied by the raising of glasses. This is especially apparent when Handel tosses the word around from voice to voice.

18. Aria: *Rejoice Greatly, O Daughter of Zion*

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion;
Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, thy King cometh unto thee;
He is the righteous Savior,
And He shall speak peace unto the heathen.
Rejoice greatly.

You'll notice the soprano sings many notes with just one "rejoice". This is called a ***melismas*** *– a group of notes sung to one syllable of text.* In such singing, St. Augustine was quoted as saying that, *"the heart may tell its joy without words, and the unbounded rush of gladness [is] not cramped by syllables."* In "rejoice" the expression of joy at the birth of Christ is certainly unbounded.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

When it comes to both Scripture and music, it has been said that you learn or find something new every time you come back to it. Take a few moments over the next week to reflect on the Bible reading and listen to the music again. What struck you differently this time around?

COME UNTO HIM

Start your discussion by reading the Bible verses together, ideally out loud. Then discuss the corresponding commentary and questions. This will allow us to reflect on the setting and context of the words. Next, watch the provided video, which will contain all of the movements for this session. Discuss the second set of questions and be sure to allow enough time for both discussions.

SCRIPTURE

READ **ISAIAH 35:1–7**

Biblical and Historical Context and Commentary:

As in our last session, the people of God are often encouraged to "rejoice greatly." But here in Isaiah 35, even the creation joins in: *the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose* (verse 1). The land that was scorched in war will be renewed and restored along with the people. God is bringing life, joy, and singing to the desert; He creates pools from parched ground for the jackals, but He also brings strength to *weak hands and feeble knees*, and encouragement to those *who are fearful-hearted.*

- Have you ever experienced a desert in life? A time of emptiness, waiting, unknown?
- How was your experience of God in this time?

When John the Baptist was in prison, he was struggling to believe that Jesus was the Messiah: "*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*" Jesus, in return, sends these words from Isaiah back to John to give reassurance that He was indeed the Anointed One (Matthew 11:1-6). The God who has come across the desert highway from exile, whose glory is risen upon us, who has entered His city in humility, has come to heal us of our afflictions. The Gospel of Matthew records exactly the miracles that Jesus talks about in His response to the Baptist; healing the blind (Matthew 9:27-31), healing the lame (9:1-8), cleansing the leper (8:1-4), healing the deaf (9:32-34), raising the dead (9:18-24), and preaching the good news to the poor (9:35-36).

- What stress in your life is causing weak hands and feeble knees? Where in your life do you need God's healing? In a relationship? In your body? From past failures? Share in your group and pray for each other.

READ **ISAIAH 40:10–11**

Biblical and Historical Context and Commentary:

The God proclaimed in Isaiah 40 comes with strong arms, but not with the strength of a bloody avenger, but rather with the gentleness, tenderness, and care of a shepherd gathering the wounded, scattered flock. Some might draw distinctions between God's divine attributes (His power, omnipotence,

etc.) and His relational attributes (His love, care, and grace). But, as written in these verses, God comes with might *and* gentleness. This is no ordinary Shepherd.

- Make a list of different attributes of God. Do they contradict each other? Which speak to you personally at this moment?
- To think of God as a shepherd is to picture His people as sheep. Describe a sheep's behavior; how are humans like them? Read John 10:11-14. What does it mean to have Jesus as our shepherd?

READ **MATTHEW 11:25–30**

Biblical and Historical Context and Commentary:

Come to Me…and learn from Me. With these words, the writer draws direct parallels to Wisdom in the Old Testament (see Proverbs 8:4, Ecclesiasticus 24:19, 51:23,26). Jesus offers the same invitation that she does; to come to Him and learn.

- Each section of the Bible reading gave reasons why someone might come to Jesus (for healing, for assurance and care, to be unburdened, etc.). How are you coming to Jesus in this New Year?

MUSIC

LISTEN to the following segments of the Messiah together. During this time, make personal notes on your feelings and reflections in the spaces provided. If you have not engaged with music in this way before, do not feel discouraged; allow the questions below to guide you.

1. How would you describe the overall mood of each movement?
2. What emotions did you feel while you were listening? What images came to mind?
3. How did the music accompany the text? What did it add? Did you hear any word/tone painting?
4. What words were emphasized by the music? What did the music add to the Scriptural texts?
5. What new realization or deeper perspective has this discussion brought to your understanding of Jesus Christ?

19. Recitative:
Then shall the Eyes of the Blind be Open'd

Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened,
And the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then shall the lame man leap as an hart,
And the tongue of the dumb shall sing.

20. Aria: *He shall Feed His Flock Like a Shepherd*

He shall feed His flock like a shepherd;
And He shall gather the lambs with His arm,
And carry them in His bosom, and gently lead
Those that are with young.

Come unto Him, all ye that labour,
Come unto Him that are heavy laden,
And He will give you rest.
Take His yoke upon you, and learn of Him,
For His is meek and lowly of heart,
And ye shall find rest unto your souls.

The lines in this movement and the next are the only words of Jesus in the music, and they are modified, so as to be cast in the third person. The Messiah Himself never speaks in the oratorio. *He shall feed His flock* is a warm, intimate, enfolding song, with lines descending like a shepherd stooping to pick up a lamb.

21. Chorus: *His Yoke is Easy, His Burden is Light*

His yoke is easy, and His burden is light.

Throughout the movement, the texture of the music is appropriately light and airy. But at the end, the light, rapid runs and the bouncing bass halt, the rhythm broadens, the texture thickens, and a feeling of heaviness replaces the lightness that existed just before. Just before the final chord we hear a slight sting of dissonance.

WHY THIS SUDDEN CHANGE?

These last few movements tell of the things that happened as a result of the Messiah's birth and conclude Part I. Yet, they also already contain a hint of what is to come.

Part II, which we will not delve into in this series, tells of the cost of the joy and salvation described in the first part; the suffering and death of the Messiah. Finally, Part III speaks of His resurrection, return and eternal reign. We invite you to finish listening to the remainder of this unique and beautiful piece of music.

You can find a full recording here:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=wbmgVQKY5YU

RESOURCES

The following texts were used in the research and writing of this series:

Brunson, Hal. *Handel's Messiah: A didactic and meditative study guide.* North Haven, CT, 2022.

Bullard, Roger A. *Messiah: The Gospel according to Handel's Oratorio.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993.

Connelly, Douglas. *The Messiah: The Texts Behind Handel's Masterpiece.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014.

Stapert, Calvin R. *Handel's Messiah: Comfort for God's People.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010.

Every Valley: Advent with the Scriptures of Handel's Messiah. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.