

“Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord”

Back in the 1970s there was an outpouring of popular musicals about Jesus. There were some that were religious in a conventional manner while using popular music idioms. These were intended for church use in worship or at revivals. They had the vibe of “Up with People” but religious. We sang some of them in my Baptist Church and in the school choir.

Then there were the ones that were intended for a wider audience. I think of three in particular “Mass,” “Jesus Christ Superstar” and “Godspell.” They imitated the older styles in format of cantata, oratorio, or opera, but the music and the lyrics were decidedly popular. “Jesus Christ Superstar” was called a rock opera. Mass had the subtitle of “A Theatre Piece for Singers, Players, and Dancers.” “Godspell” was called “A musical based on the Gospel according to St. Matthew.” While they all had dramatic intentions they were not written for cathedrals or churches, they were pieces for the theater on religious subjects. Interestingly, only one of the men involved with these projects was a Christian. John-Michael Tebelak the lyricist for Godspell was a lifelong Episcopalian.¹ The composers and other librettists of these Christian pieces were Jewish (Stephen Schwartz and Leonard Bernstein), agnostic (Andrew Lloyd Webber), or claim no religious affiliation (Tim Rice).

There was lots of great music in these shows. This week I was reminded of a song from Godspell. It just has seven words which are repeated. The music is simple and infectious. Does anyone have any idea of what song about which I am talking? [sing “Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord”]. This is the song that starts the show proper following a prologue. The song calls all the cast onto the stage to be baptized by the one playing John the Baptist. It starts out as a solo voice with others joining in singing in rousing unison. It is musically uplifting and invigorating for the audience. I can feel the tug of wanting to join them in the singing and baptisms.

Of course, this one line is taken from Isaiah who was quoted by Luke when he describes the beginning of John’s ministry.

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”²

It is a beautiful passage and one that we hear not only referenced in “Godspell” but also Handel’s “Messiah.”³ But what does it mean? What did it mean to Isaiah and the people of his time? What did it mean for Luke? What does it mean for us?

In Isaiah’s time he was foretelling the return of the Israelites to Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon. In the verses preceding this passage Isaiah assures the people that they will be given solace by the Lord. The words are “Comfort, oh comfort my people Says

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John-Michael_Tebelak accessed December 7, 2024.

² Luke 3:4b-6

³ “Ev’ry Valley Shall Be Exalted” tenor aria Part 1 Scene 1 *Messiah* by G. F. Handel.

your God.” Then he reassures them that their term of punishment in exile is over.⁴ As we come to the section cited by Luke, we understand the context to be that the Presence of the Lord was in exile as were the Israelites. Now Isaiah calls for a pathway through the desert and wilderness to be made so that the Presence of God can return to Jerusalem.

Luke took this passage out of that context and repurposes it to describe John the Baptist as the one crying out in the wilderness to proclaim the coming of the Messiah. Luke copies Mark in this repurposing of Isaiah as does Matthew. John’s way of preparation is to repent and be baptized as a sign of that repentance.

But what does “Prepare ye the way of the Lord” mean for us today? What does it mean to you or what could it mean for us? Let me hear your thoughts. [Listen for: preparing our hearts or minds for God, preparing our world for God, caring for others, caring for ourselves, caring for creation, acting in the world like we really accept what Jesus said about caring for the other even the enemy, living the ten commandments instead of paying lip service to them....] All of these are good thoughts and are to be pondered. Whichever one strikes you as the hardest to accept I suggest you look at that one closely.

In my life, I have found that when I am challenged by a thought or religious practice that is where I am most likely to learn something. For example, growing up Baptist there was an aversion to speaking about the Blessed Virgin Mary. It was so Catholic to revere her, pray through or to her, or to mention her except in the context of the Christmas narrative. I remember being challenged about my stubbornness to recognize Mary. I realized that I needed to look at that aversion. In doing so I learned something about myself, my faith, and how God works.

Take the challenge that the words “Prepare ye the way of the Lord” offer. What in your heart resists preparing for the Lord? You do not have to sit down and ponder for hours on end or read commentaries on this. Just let it sit in your mind or your heart. Let it stew, and like a good stew let it sit off the heat for a while before warming it back up. Taste it again and see if letting it sit has enriched the flavor or your perceptions. What is God asking you to prepare for or who is God asking you to help prepare?

We have an entire life to prepare the way of the Lord. I expect it is something that will never be fully realized until we breathe our last breath. I think we will be better for it if we continue to prepare until that day. Do not forget to sing, hum, or keep in your head, [singing] “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” It will help you on your way.

⁴ Isaiah 40:1-2 JPS