The Messiah

Walking through the streets of Worcester at the beginning of December a few years ago was a study in contrasts. Empty stores and businesses cancelled memories of a once prosperous downtown. Occasional small groups of people hurried in the cold down Main Street instead of bustling crowds one might expect on a Saturday night. Glass and steel buildings erected in attempts to rescue downtown stood near "antique" ones distinguished by more detail, character, and stateliness. We entered one of those classic buildings, Mechanics Hall, to hear Handel's *Messiah*.

My sister, Tess, had started a tradition of attending this annual performance in Worcester. She worked in and led a shelter for battered women and children for many years in Worcester, and this annual pilgrimage to Mechanics Hall is a testament to her belief in redemption even in the face of cruelty and the damage it exacts.

This oratorio, *Messiah*, was first performed in Dublin in 1742 and in many ways redeemed George Frideric Handel's career and fortunes. Redemption is, or course, at the center of this work, the lyrical text closely following the Scriptures from the opening words of assurance ("Comfort, comfort ye my people …") and promise ("And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed …") to the closing words of victory over death and all it means for the world.

Throughout *Messiah*, the listener lives in the tension between promise and realization, expectation and satisfaction, loss and gain, emptiness and fullness, struggle and victory. Listeners from 1742 until today have experienced this conflicted sense of knowing that God has made a definitive saving act in the life and death of the Messiah but, at the same time, knowing that evil and suffering remain. We are, then, still in the midst of the great struggle, the churning of people's hearts and human history that is redemption being wrought.

It is clear in the music and lyrics that the fulcrum of moving creation back to goodness is this person, Jesus, the Messiah. All that has gone wrong with God's intention at creation, the unspeakable harm that has been done nation to nation, tribe to tribe, person to person; all that cries out for justice and mercy; all that is in need of salvation through the centuries until the present day somehow funnels down onto this one person, the Messiah.

And he is an odd Messiah at that. "He was despised and rejected of men: a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief," sings the soprano in the middle of the oratorio. Even apart from Handel, everyone knows from the prophet Isaiah and the life and death of Jesus that the Messiah brings salvation through his suffering. "Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows," sings the chorus, continuing loudly, "And with His stripes we are healed." Taking onto himself the full iniquity of humanity, Jesus the Messiah loved, and healed, and forgave, and preached the expanded law of love until he sacrificed himself out of this love of even the enemy.

The great struggle of redemption continues as every audience member at the *Messiah* well knows, but Jesus continues as well, a fact that is celebrated with the rousing ending of the oratorio. Raised from the dead, He lives, and in the face of a world still resistant to God's will for His creation, overcoming evil and redeeming creation still falls on Him. For the discerning believer sitting in the audience, this may be comforting but it should also be somewhat frightening if he or she should recall words of the apostle Paul.

Handel does not leave the recollection of Paul to chance because in a recitative just before the final chorus that is not always included in performances of the *Messiah*, he quotes Paul's letter to the Romans, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" He is reminding the audiences of Paul who teaches us in I Corinthians 12 that yes, Jesus lives, but that *we* are His body, He lives through us. And so, we are now part of the fulcrum that is moving creation back to its original goodness. I suppose this is a supernatural instance of audience participation. The Messiah lives and through His Spirit He dwells within the audiences of the *Messiah*.

This is very challenging if not astounding, but it is what this season is all about. Advent and Christmas focus on our role as the people who have hope that while we live in this time between Jesus' first coming and His second, our daily acts, the decisions we make, the goodness we do on whatever scale moves everyone further along from promise to realization, emptiness to fullness, struggle to victory.

By the end of the performance, with these thoughts winding through my head, I felt a different sense of responsibility as one human being among the billions. But I did not feel alone or overwhelmed. I felt I could do my part along with others. That is really all God expects.