

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven
December 25, 2025

Christmas Day

It was a rough time for the composer George Frederick Handel. He'd made a fortune for himself and a reputation as the best in the world with his Italian operas, which were all the rage in his adopted homeland of England. But the tide had turned and the fickle London audiences wanted nothing more to do with Italian opera. They now wanted their entertainment to be in English. And so Charles Jennens, Handel's writing partner, came to him with an idea. A bold, daring idea. They would bring the world, in English, the greatest story ever told. The wondrous, inarticulable mystery of the Incarnation, God come among us. It would be a major work for soloists, chorus and orchestra. And they would call it Messiah.

Handel wasn't sure what he thought. It was a bold idea, yes, and surely it would capture the moment. But how was he going to set these words, this story, to music? How would he capture that which can't be captured? Mary and the shepherds, along with the angels, and the baby; the one who was both human and divine? Setting Jesus to music? Could he do that convincingly? It was a lot to ask, maybe too much. His subjects to date had been larger than life kings and queens and mythical heroes but nothing like this. This subject was Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end, the world's creator, born here on earth. In a stable, with animals. How was he going to do it?

His collaborator gave him exciting words from scripture and, even better, a contract. A good, lucrative contract. Hope for a stalled career. Handel needed no more persuading and went to work, setting the entire libretto, though it's almost impossible, *in 24 days*. That's right. It took him 24 days to write The Messiah, all three hours of it; all parts ready for choir, orchestra and soloists. He set it in a white heat with a confidence and speed that seemed almost *to offend* the writer, who had imagined more time would be lavished on the words he had assembled. "Handel has made a fine entertainment of these words," Jennens said after hearing his friend's music for the first time, "though not near so good as he might and ought to have done. I have made him correct some of the grossest faults in the composition."

As it turned out, Handel agreed with many of his suggestions. Most of all, he agreed that something was missing. The words had all been set and the story had gotten told. But the birth, the Incarnation, the Christmas moment, needed something more, something that wasn't a solo for a singer or a chorus. Handel puzzled over it. And then, one night, late in the warm summer, in a flash, it came to him. A half-minute of music, no more, that's all that was needed. It would be wordless so that it could attempt to capture this mystery. It would be music of a quiet, hushed ecstasy but also of rustic simplicity- it would be music of heaven and earth at the same time. And here's what he wrote. [Play Pifa]

He played it for Jennens and they agreed. The work we know as Messiah was finally complete, not a note would be changed. This brief symphony captured the mystery and finished the piece. Jennens and Handel immediately arranged performances. They were confident enough that they held an open rehearsal so that music-lovers would come hear it free of charge and spread the

word. It worked. So many advance tickets were purchased for the premiere that the producers sent out a notice asking women *not to wear hoops* to the performance so that they could make every inch of the theater available for seating.

Handel had written music of such power that Beethoven would spend his final earthly days in bed simply gazing upon the score and at this wordless music in awe; marveling at how Handel had captured the Christmas story- this ultimate mystery- in such a brief and simple piece of music. How the music is a quiet dance of joy but also a prayer. [play a bit again]

And that, of course, is the mystery we've gathered this morning to behold yet again: the mystery of this moment: of Mary, the shepherds, angels and the child; the mystery of heaven meeting earth; the mystery that God might beyond any measure of our rational understanding *be born in us* and that we might be called to bear God to the world. This is the essence of our incarnational faith, somehow captured so completely and wordlessly by Handel. God is born in us and through us borne to all and born in all.

And so this morning we share these few moments together considering this mystery, in the music of Handel, in our carols, in our prayers, and in our time gathered at the altar. It's the mystery of Christmas we consider today- the ineffable mystery that an inextinguishable light now surrounds us, that the darkness that can seem so real in fact *has no chance* as God comes among us and as our hearts prepare him room. *Joy to the world*, the carol announces, *the Lord is come!* As it turns out, that music is by Handel as well. [play the opening phrase] And in its peals of radiant joy it shines and pulsates with the same good news, the glorious good news of Christmas. The Lord has come to be born among us, come to be born *in us* in ways that surprise and astonish, disturb and delight us, born *in us* in joy as we run with the shepherds to proclaim the good news, born *in us* in love as we like Mary open wide our hearts to the glad tidings that God does indeed scatter the darkness - even *this* darkness - to be born right here, right now, again and again and again and always.