

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey

*Thus, It Is Written*, on Luke 24:44-53

Jesus had three years with his disciples to teach them everything he knew. Three years to expound and explain, to enlighten and impart. And yet, on the day of his Ascension he still launches into a colossal synopsis of the nature and purpose of his life, death, and resurrection. It's a last lecture with footnotes, as he cross-references his curriculum vitae with scripture.

Thus, it is written: the law, prophets, and psalms coalesce on his resurrected tongue. He admits that it is a rerun; these are words he has already spoken. But he can't resist the impulse to remind his disciples of what they are already supposed to know. As the tide of teaching recedes, he begins blessing them. The wordy Word made flesh is still speaking words of benediction when he makes his final ascent.

Just as Jesus dipped into the prophets and psalms to help the disciples make sense of what was happening, so too does George Frederick Handel. Handel's *Messiah* is a monumental account of God's work in Jesus Christ. He pulls from the entirety of scripture to shape the narrative. The text of the oratorio is a colossal synopsis of the nature and purpose of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection.

Thus, it is written, indeed. It is fitting that the day our musicians present it in worship is Ascension Sunday - the day we are invited to imagine Jesus returning to Heaven. Next week, on Pentecost Sunday, we'll return to celebrate the fulfillment of yet another prophecy, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

This is my prayer for today: that through the gift of this music - sacred texts set to glorious song - our hearts might be softened, and our minds might be open to understand the scriptures. Likewise, I pray that we might experience ourselves to be blessed by Jesus himself, and that our response would echo the Disciples. Luke tells us that "they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God."

As we receive these words and music and this blessing from on high, the reasonable thing to do is answer with praise and thanksgiving. The rational thing to do is to bless the God who has so richly blessed us. And yes, it is entirely sensible to accept the generous invitation to join in the Disciples' great joy.

Following one of the earliest performances of the *Messiah*, an audience member praised the work as "fine entertainment." Handel responded, "I should be sorry if I only entertained them. I wish to make them better." May these words also be fulfilled today: that we might be made better - more faithful, more joyful, more transformed by the astonishingly good news of Jesus Christ. Amen.