

## God Save the People

*The Second Sunday after Pentecost, 11 June 2023. Genesis 12:1-9; Psalm 33:1-12; Romans 4:13-18; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26.*

A sermon series built around shows and musicals has to include two shows:

- *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which will be at the end of the series on July 30th.
- And *Godspell* – our show for today.

Most of the music in *Godspell* is by Stephen Schwartz who also wrote *Pippin* and *Wicked*. But the creator of the show was John-Michael Tebelak - who grew up in an Episcopal church.

He thought about becoming a priest but decided to give theater a try. One night during grad school in 1970, he went to an Episcopal Church for the Easter Vigil. He dressed as he always dressed – in overalls and a T-shirt. He wore his hair long like a lot of people. Just prior to the service, it started to snow. He was sad when he heard people in the pews complaining about the snow rather than centering themselves in the wonder of Easter. He was annoyed when the priest decided to rush the service along. Then as the service ended, a plain clothes policeman stopped him to search him for drugs.

Tebelak was furious. He later said “It angered me so much that I went home and realized what I wanted to do with the Gospels: I wanted to make it the simple, joyful message that I felt the first time I read them and recreate the sense of community, which I did not share when I went to that service.”

Tebelak wrote *Godspell* as a school project. The original version featured Episcopal hymns played by a rock band. Sonia Manzano, better known as Maria on Sesame Street, was in the first school cast. When the show moved off-Broadway the producers hired Stephen Schwartz to update the music and gave him five weeks to do it. He wrote a few new pieces but most of what he wrote was new music for the old hymns.

“Day by Day” – Hymn 654

“O Bless the Lord My Soul” – Hymn 411

“All Good Gifts” – Hymn 291

“Turn Back, O Man” is not in our current hymnal, but it was Hymn 536 in the 1940 Hymnal, which was in pews at that time.

*Godspell* is musically and theatrically brilliant. It is also theologically brilliant. So much so that this is my second sermon about *Godspell* this year. For Sunday, January 29, when we celebrated our music ministry, I spent all week preparing a loving tribute to church music. Late on Saturday night, I realized it would not work at an 8:30 service with no music. The gospel lesson that day was the Beatitudes, so I quickly wrote another sermon which talked about *Godspell*'s presentation of the Beatitudes in the song "All for the Best." Go to our YouTube channel and find the 8:30 service on January 29 if you want to hear that.

For today, let's talk about a different number: "God Save the People". Hymn 496 in the 1940 Hymnal.

It is the first song sung by Jesus in the show. But to understand it, we have to go to the very beginning.

The Prologue to *Godspell* is often left out, but it sets the stage. The show opens with "The Tower of Babble" – B-A-B-B-L-E. Cast members begin as great philosophers and thinkers from history, each sharing their message. They speak and sing on top of one another, a cacophony of noise and ideas. In the original productions they threw throw garbage at one another, to symbolize the war and violence that erupt when philosophies clash.

In the midst of this chaos, John the Baptist sounds the shofar and begins to sing, simply, over and over, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." The philosophers join in and become the actors who will become the clowns who follow Jesus.

Stephen Schwartz explained the prologue this way: "The point was that the arrival of a new philosopher was heralded, and this new presence (Jesus) would bring a different way of looking at life that could ultimately unite them all."

While singing "Prepare Ye", John baptizes all of the disciples. Then Jesus shows up and asks to be baptized. John reluctantly agrees, and Jesus starts to sing, "When wilt thou save *the people*."

The words in the hymn are identical to the words in the show until the final verse.

*God save the people; Thine they are,  
Thy children, as Thine angels fair;  
From vice, oppression, and despair,  
God save the people!*

The show leaves out vice and oppression, but they're implied.

In many productions of the show Jesus wears a Superman T-shirt. I finally realized; the S is not for Superman. It's for SAVE. Jesus came to save – the people. Plural. Everyone. A hated tax collector. Many tax collectors and sinners. The daughter of a leader of the synagogue. A woman who had been sick for twelve years. That's just one day.

And Jesus was continuing the work God started in the beginning.

The stories in early Genesis follow a pattern. God creates. Humanity causes a problem. God saves the people.

God created Eden. Adam and Eve disobeyed, became ashamed of their nakedness, and had to leave the garden for their own safety. So, God gave them clothes. God saved the people.

God gave Adam and Eve children. Cain killed his brother Abel. God put a mark on Cain to protect him and end the violence. God saved the people.

Humanity became violent anyway, so much so that God decided to start over. God sent a flood to destroy the earth. But God saved Noah and his family and all the animals and gave the world another chance. God saved the people.

Then humanity decided to build a tower to reach the heavens, the original Tower of Babel – B-A-B-E-L. That may not seem like a problem to us, but in its time the tower represented a technological advance that seems useful but can cause great harm. Like fossil fuels, nuclear weapons, and AI. So, God confused their language and scattered the people into nations to limit the harm they could do. God saved the people.

Then out of the blue, like John the Baptist on the stage, God called to Abram and promised to create a new nation from descendants of Abram and Sarai who did not yet exist.

Note that the Lord's promise did not stop with "I will bless *you* and make *your* name great." There was a bigger point to the blessing. "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." God save the *people*.

The question "Are you saved" does not go far enough. God's salvation is never just for us alone. God is working to save and redeem everything. And we are saved when catch that vision, when we see the world as we, not me, when we follow Jesus in that different way of looking at life that ultimately unites us all.

In 1970 and 71, an Episcopalian and a Jew figured that out and put it on stage and in song.

*Shall crime bring crime forever,  
Strength aiding still the strong?  
Is it thy will, o Father,  
That men shall toil for wrong?  
"No", say thy mountains;  
"No", say thy skies;  
Man's clouded sun shall brightly rise,  
And songs be heard instead of sighs.  
God save the people.*

+++

©2023

Grace Burton-Edwards  
St. Thomas Episcopal Church  
Columbus, GA 31906  
StThomasColumbus.org