

Program Notes

THE LIGHT IN THE WILDERNESS
by Dave Brubeck



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PART I

- I. The Temptations (Chorus and Solo)
- II. Forty Days (Chorus)
- III. Repent, Follow Me (Solo)
- IV. The Sermon on the Mount (Chorus and Solo)
- V. Repent, Follow Me (Chorus and Solo)
- VI. The Great Commandment (Chorus and Solo)
- VII. Love Your Enemies (Chorus and Solo)

PART II

- VIII. Where Is God (Chorus and Solo)
- IX. Peace I Leave With You (Solo)
- X. Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled (Chorus and Solo)
- XI. Yet a Little While (Chorus and Solo)
- XII. Praise Ye the Lord (Chorus)

When people ask why a jazz musician should attempt to write an oratorio, they invariably want to know what "the persuasion" of my religious convictions is. To dispense with the last question first, although reared as a Presbyterian by a Christian Scientist mother who attended a Methodist church, and although this piece was written with the theological counsel of a Vedanta leader, a Unitarian minister, an Episcopalian bishop and several Jesuit priests, I am not affiliated with any church. Three Jewish teachers have been a great influence in my life -- Irving Goleman, Darius Milhaud, and Jesus. I am a product of Judaic-Christian thinking. Without the complications of theological doctrine I wanted to understand what I had inherited in this world -- both problems and answers -- from that cultural heritage. This composition is, I suppose, simply one man's attempt to distill in his own thought and to express in his own way the essence of Jesus' teaching. In fact, at one point I considered titling this work "The Temptations and Teachings of Christ."

THE LIGHT IN THE WILDERNESS, Part I, takes as its text the temptations of Jesus, his message of hope to a suffering world, and the summation of his teaching in the commandment to love one another. The baptism of Jesus was the dramatic sign for his mission to begin -- and it was Jesus the Teacher I wanted to understand -- thus, the oratorio opens with this symbolic picture of man's spiritual rebirth.

If one wants to revolutionize the thinking of the world without destroying it, how does one begin? The temptation to rationalize one's compromising as a means to gain idealistic ends is the theme of the wilderness dialogue between Jesus and the devil. In the choral narrative I have given almost equal power to the scheming Tempter and the opening Voice from Heaven, both of which are written in 5/4 meter, to emphasize that in each of us (even Jesus) the tug of war between good and evil is never ending.

The symbolic significance of each temptation has been the source of much speculation. Everyone seems to understand bread (it's the jazz world's term for money). It's the most commonly used tool of power among men and nations. We should earnestly ponder the reasons why a starving Jesus rejected as unworthy the promise of fulfilled appetites. Later in his ministry, Jesus, out of compassion, did feed the hungry. The ethical questions raised by the first temptation are extremely relevant. Does one use man's insatiable appetite to gain power? Are we generous only when the granary is full? Does one give only when the recipient can repay, or when he can be useful to our purpose? In his later teaching Jesus answered these questions for us.

The second temptation is a test of faith, a sly challenge to the ego. I think Jesus refused the power of the miracle and the spectacular leap from the "pinnacle of the Temple" so that he could demonstrate in his humanity the greater power of love and compassion. Just as one should not use the physical appetites of man for gain, neither should one prey upon his fear of the supernatural.

Finally, the devil flashed before the eyes of Jesus the most tempting prize of all -- absolute power to rule all nations and all peoples. Could such a prize enable Jesus to fulfill his selfless dream of perfection? Our world's history has been a continual demonstration of the corruption that accompanies power. Although Jesus was prepared ultimately to sacrifice his life, the devil's price for the earthly kingdom was far too dear. "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

Jesus' rejection of all known approaches to power leaves for our consideration the one way the world has not fully tried. It was the one way Jesus chose 2000 years ago.

Jesus in the wilderness is only touched upon by the Synoptic gospels. Whatever went on in his mind during his solitary fast, it must have been a soul-searching beyond our imagination; and yet he must have asked basically the same question we all ask -- Who am I? This lonely search is what I tried to express in FORTY DAYS, sung first as a quiet hymn, followed by an introspective instrumental passage, much in the style of a Bach chorale in 5/4 meter.

When it was clear to Jesus who he was and what he must do, he emerged from the desert wilderness with the passionate cry to RETHINK! (for that is what "repent" means), to look at traditional teaching with new eyes, to hear God's word with new ears, to feel the wonder of life with the open senses of a child.

The revolutionary concept that the last shall be made first was his first major sermon. The chorus, acting sometimes as narrator and sometimes in the timeless role of the multitude, repeats the joyful promise of the Beatitudes, but in their expectant hope do not heed Jesus' exhortation to RETHINK as the necessary prelude. Throughout the Beatitudes there is a struggle between the solo voice of Jesus and the voice of the multitude. The chorus shouts of heavenly reward; Jesus counsels THINK! NOW! "The kingdom of God is within you." After the tumult the disciples are solemnly chosen. As each name is called (12 different notes for the 12 disciples) timpani beats portray the measured tread of footsteps. These simple men who answered Jesus' call, "Follow me" were destined to walk the face of the known world and alter the course of history. "The meek shall inherit the earth."

Jesus came, he said, not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. The chorus of the faithful in a 5/4 ostinato ask "Teach us, Master. What must we do to gain eternal life?" Like classroom children, they repeat the basic and familiar tenet: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole soul, with thy whole mind, with thy whole strength; and thy neighbor as thyself." Jesus adds: "Love your enemies." According to some religious scholars this commandment is the one new moral concept Jesus brought to the traditional code of the Jews. Although we have been told the minds of the East and the West shall never meet, it fascinates me that Buddha, over 500 years before Jesus, considered the identical concept the crowning jewel of enlightenment.

The idiocy of the entire Christian world bent on fratricide rather than brotherhood leads me to believe that we have missed the whole point of Jesus' life. I puzzled as a young soldier twenty-five years ago (as I do now) at Christians who can still think in terms of "the enemy," forgetting that devout prayers are being offered to the One God from both sides of the battle. In God's eyes can there be an enemy?

A peaceful and merciful world seems to me as credible as Hitler's army of hate. We can surely enlighten and prepare for a cause more natural to man's spirit. Chaplains reported during World War II that almost every man in his solitude was a pacifist, and selfless sacrifices to save others were common. The dualism of man is apparent throughout history. Some of the bloodiest chapters have been written in the name of religion, and on the other hand, some of history's most enlightened regimes have been controlled by the military (Europe and Japan following World War II). General Omar Bradley said,

We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living.

All men in their highest idealism recognize the nobility and love in a Christ, or a Buddha, or a Socrates. Aren't the questioning youth of today -- these modern uncouth prophets crying in the wilderness -- truly the sons and daughters of our own aspiration? Aren't they rudely reminding us of the torch of idealism we have allowed to dim?

Using a jagged twelve-note theme that stresses the difficulty of the commandment to love your enemies, Jesus explains what it means in terms of daily existence. He does not plead for love in harmonious, sentimental tones, but sings more of a battle cry for courage to face the war with self.

This section is based on three 12-note themes. The first is stated in the form of a command (in 3/4 time) with an antiphonal response from the chorus, followed by a method (in 4/4), a corollary in the Oriental manner of "rules of conduct," which helps one to obey the command. The same pattern is also used in the antiphonal response of the chorus.

Love your enemies. (3/4)	Do good to those who hate you. (4/4)
Bless those who curse you.	Pray for those who abuse you.
To him who strikes you on the cheek	offer the other also.
From him who takes away your cloak	do not withhold your coat as well.

The second 12-note theme is the Golden Rule: "And as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them."

The third theme, "If you love those that love you, what credit is that to you?" introduces rhythmic patterns of growing complexity.

"He sends his rain on the just and unjust; makes his sun rise on the evil. He makes his sun rise on the good. Do not judge and you shall not be judged. Do not condemn and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give and it is given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put in your lap."

In the twelve extended cadential bars, which is the final statement of the main theme, "the measure that ye give will be the measure you get back" is musically demonstrated by adding one beat to each measure of the theme, "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you." Meanwhile, the chorus, also adding a beat to each measure, recapitulates the lessons Christ has just taught them. A variety of musical styles has been used freely throughout the piece (since Christian teaching is for all time), but it is even more evident in "Love Your Enemies" with its musical collage of quick jumps from modern to modal, Middle Eastern to country hoe-down, jazz, rock and roll to martial drums.

Part II deals primarily with questions of faith and man's place in the universe. A lesson from the temptations is formulated in the opening solo "What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

This is followed by a simple setting of the 24th Psalm, picturing man serenely at peace with nature. As the Psalmist's text moves from peaceful oneness of creation to questions about our uniquely human condition, the writing becomes more complex. Using as a departure point the text "This is the generation of them that seek him," the choir becomes the voice of all lost and seeking generations in their confused and sometimes fruitless search for meaning.

Jesus blesses all those who seek with a promise of spiritual peace.

"Let not your heart be troubled, ye believe in God" was meant to be part of a service dedicated to the memory of my young nephew, Philip, whose sudden death in May, 1965, profoundly affected our family. From the initial piece, a testimony of faith, grew the idea of an oratorio to be dedicated to Philip and my own children's generation. Actually, the idea of writing such a piece had been growing in my mind for many years. As a child I did not question the literal meaning of the many mansions in my Father's house. I am not sure of the true meaning of this passage now (although I'm sure the many mansions are as figurative as Buddha's many ladders to heaven), but the child's faith remains. The instrumental interlude which follows is intended as a period in which to "re-think."

Jesus' final solo "Yet a little while is the light with you" is the plea of our Christian heritage to walk while we still have the light, lest darkness come upon us.

If the first life on earth was a unicellular blob, its formation was no less of a miracle than Adam, and all life is of common descent. In the totality of the universe our 20th century concepts are scarcely less primitive than the archaic text of Psalm 148, a magnificent hymn of all creation and the almighty Creator. PRAISE YE THE LORD! is an unquestioning affirmation of all life in all forms. I have chosen to close with this Psalm because like the ancient psalmist, my religious faith is rooted in awe at the infinitude of creation.

When I see signs of the times in the streets, hear the songs of social protest, read the poetry of youth, they seem to portend a new era, perhaps even a new age. The Christian world had its age of Faith in the dim past when Faith is all we had. The age of Hope was ushered in by the Enlightenment and the optimistic expansion of Western (hence, Christian) civilization. In the accelerated page of history, will the 21st century be known as the Age of Love?

This is the generation of them that seek him.

Dave Brubeck