



SERMON RECAP SEPTEMBER 6, 2026

The Prophet of Inclusion: Anybodies from West Side Story Isaiah 56:1-8

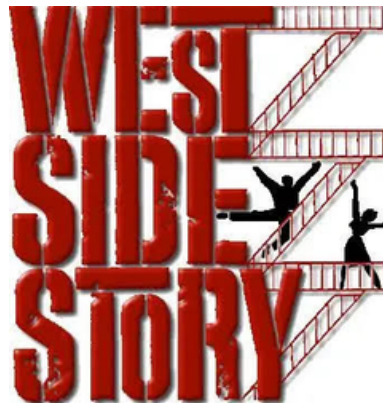
A few weeks ago I was about to say that Man of La Mancha had the oldest source material of this series. Based on Cervantes' Don Quixote, which was written in 1605, I had forgotten that West Side Story's source material was Shakespeare. Romeo and Juliet, the story of two young people of rival families who fall in love and die in a tragic ending, was first performed in 1595. West Side Story didn't win Best Musical at the 1958 Tony Awards (The Music Man won), but today many consider it the greatest American musical ever written. The film version won 10 Academy Awards.

Remade as a film in 2021 by Stephen Spielberg, West Side Story has proven to be a timeless classic that audiences keep connecting with. One reason is that producers have allowed it to adapt over time. One way that can be seen is in the song "Somewhere." A beloved ballad of hope while longing for a world where there can be peace, the song has changed its meaning by where it is placed in the show.

Originally it was sung by Tony and Maria as a dream of escape, a vision of a place where their love could survive. But in more recent productions, "Somewhere" has been given to the character Anybody's — a gender-nonconforming youth who never fits neatly into either world.

When Anybody's sings it, the meaning shifts. It becomes a song for those who have been told they don't belong anywhere, a longing for a world where identity is not policed and dignity is not denied. I first saw this adaptation in the Quad Cities in 2016, at a time when transgender people were beginning to be targeted with unjust laws. Hearing Anybody's sing "Somewhere" in that moment made the song feel prophetic. It was no longer just about forbidden romance; it was about the deep human hope for a place where all people can live without fear.

This longing connects directly to Isaiah 56:1–8, one of the most radical passages in all of scripture. In these verses, Isaiah declares that the new city God is building will include the eunuch and the immigrant — two groups who were historically excluded from full participation in



West Side Story premiered in 1957 with music by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, and a book by Arthur Laurents. It opened on Broadway later that year and won 2 Tony Awards, including Best Choreography for Jerome Robbins. Its 1961 film adaptation became a landmark success, winning 10 Academy Awards including Best Picture.

Isaiah insists that God is gathering all people, and that the house of God will be a house of prayer for all nations.

This is Third Isaiah's vision: after the exile, after the destruction, after the return, the community must be rebuilt — but rebuilt differently. Rebuilt with wider doors. Rebuilt with deeper welcome. Rebuilt with room for those who had been pushed aside. "I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered." It is a house for anybody, or in this case maybe, "Anybody's."

Remember in the Gospels, Jesus is most angered when he sees the Temple is no longer a house of prayer for all people, but instead is a place where there is exclusion, separation, and hierarchy. Jesus has these words on his lips in his act of justice and provocation that leads to his arrest and execution.

And this brings us back to West Side Story. The original film was shot on location in what was known as San Juan Hill — the very neighborhood the show is about. Its dilapidated, demolition-like grungy feel was not set design. It was real. Filmed in and among rubble as the neighborhood was being torn down and rebuilt, the movie captured the literal displacement of immigrant communities.

Part of the tragedy of West Side Story is that the two immigrant populations — embodied in the rival gangs, the Jets and the Sharks — were kept fighting with each other for turf that was never theirs. They were being pushed out and marginalized together. The poor were divided by outrage so that the powerful could profit from their exploitation.

Isaiah imagines a different world, a world where the immigrant is welcomed, the eunuch is honored, and those who have been told "there is no place for you" are gathered by God. *West Side Story* reveals the tragedy the happens when the promise is denied. We are left to continue the promise of Isaiah and answer the cry of "Somewhere." We will build a world that welcomes the "other." Let it be here. Let it be now. Let it be us.

Israel's religious life.

NEXT WEEK:

The Prophet of Kindness: Quadimodo from "The Hunchback of Notre Dame"