

**Beauty and Reverence: Great and Holy Friday Evening Service
(the *Epitaphios Threnos*, the Lamentation at the Tomb)**

Sewon Jang
Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA

Introduction

The Greek Orthodox Cathedral of the Ascension in Oakland is located at 4700 Lincoln Avenue, next door to Oakland's Mormon Temple.¹ Like most Eastern Orthodox churches, the building has three main parts: the narthex (vestibule), the nave (the interior of the church), and the sanctuary (also called the altar or holy place).² I attended the Great and Holy Friday evening service called *Epitaphios Threnos* (the lamentation at the tomb) on April 6, 2018, my first experience in a Greek Orthodox Church. This service observes the unnailing of Christ from the cross and the placement of his body in the tomb. When I entered the church, I noticed the abundance of religious icons and images. From the altar of the church to the decorative paintings and vestments, I was in awe of the beauty that surrounded me. As I stood listening and reading along during the service, especially during the lamentations, the beauty of the physical space created an immersive experience that provoked a profound sense of reverence. These terms – beauty and reverence – were fundamental to the worship experience of Great and Holy Friday.

In contrast to Greek Orthodox services, Presbyterian services emphasize preaching almost exclusively. Indeed, Protestants believe that God's word is central to worship, and the health of a church is mainly dependent on the quality of the preaching. However, if we make every aspect of worship subservient to preaching, we risk diminishing the liturgy's overall power. Although Korean Presbyterian churches have some images such as the crucifix, the stations of the cross on the back wall, and the baptismal font, unfortunately, they are rarely emphasized in the service. Robin M. Jensen remarks:

Most of us can remember back to the days when worship in the Reformed churches was truly "plain." Sanctuaries were largely unadorned and functional places, no matter how architecturally pleasing they might or might not be. Sunday mornings were solemn, and worship, although often grand and glorious, was also serious and sober... The sermon was the centerpiece of the service and also the minister's most important moment during the week. The memorial floral arrangement on the communion table provided the only really brilliant spot of color in the environment.³

Jensen also expresses her concerns, observing, "I worry that too often art is perceived as a kind of extra offering, meant for those of us who can appreciate it or want to be involved, rather than something essential to the shaping of faith and religious experience."⁴ After

¹ For more information about the community, visit the site "Ascension Cathedral – Orthodox Christian," accessed April 10, 2018, <https://www.ascensioncathedral.com/>.

² For more information about the architecture, see "Eastern Orthodox church architecture" from Wikipedia, accessed April 10, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Orthodox_church_architecture.

³ Robin M. Jensen, "The Arts in Protestant Worship," *Theology Today* 58, no. 3 (October 1, 2001): 360. See also Janet R. Walton, *Art and Worship: A Vital Connection* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier Books, 1991), 68-69.

attending the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of the Ascension, I finally came to understand the sacramental worldview. The church became more than a chance to hear God's word. It became an opportunity to recognize God's transcendence in symbolic icons and images. In short, I experienced the greatness and holiness of God through visual art. Kenneth Schmidt brings us a profound insight about how works of art help us have an immersive worship experience:

They are silent. Any dialogue that is generated by the work of art comes from the response of the viewer. The work of art provides a setting for thinking and reflection through an involved encounter with the object. In this way, the art object has the potential to give birth, or serve as a "mid-wife" for reflecting on the truths of Scripture.⁵

Toward Beauty

The Cathedral is in marked contrast to the simplicity one finds in Protestant churches. The church's beauty was overwhelming for me, who, as a Protestant, was reared to think the crucifix and the stations of the cross on the back wall were holy objects, and that stained-glass windows were ornate. It was like walking into a whole new world of beauty and holiness. The exterior has three archways emblazoned with rich colors. The large dome, tinted green on the exterior, is buttressed on all sides by intricately latticed windows. The dome's interior is multi-paneled with copper plates, giving it an intriguing golden sheen. The interior of the dome is encased in plates depicting icons of Christ Pantocrator and the twelve apostles. The icon of Christ Pantocrator is forty feet in diameter with a jewel-like halo. The dome catches the reflection of the hundreds of miniscule lights of the chandelier which resemble candles. The icon screen includes an apse with the icon of the *Platytera* and is adjacent to the solea with the pulpit and the bishop's throne. The icon of St. John the Baptist directs attention to the icon of Christ the King, a visual representation of John's dictum, "Behold the Lamb of God." Moreover, there is an iconostasis with three entrances which are used during services, a deacon door on either side, and a royal door in the center.⁶

The sanctuary includes the holy altar and is separated from the nave by the iconostasis. This division reminds us that though we frequently find ourselves separated from God through sin, Christ will return to complete God's Kingdom. During the service, these spatial features make us realize that we are the body of Christ, that we become one through Christ. The Gospel Book was laid on top of the *Epitaphios* along with Christ's burial shroud. The *Epitaphios* icon depicts Christ, who has been removed from the cross. The scene is taken from the Gospel of St. John 19:38-42.⁷ Generally, it stands in front of the church for the whole day so that people can venerate the cross of Christ and kiss the icon.

The beauty of the art and design not only creates an inviting atmosphere for worship, but it also embodies the doctrine of Orthodoxy. The physical space conveys theological meanings and values. In his book, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue*, William A. Dyrness argues for the value of art for theological reflection and Christian

⁴ See also Robin M. Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen: Art, Faith, and the Christian Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 2.

⁵ Kenneth Schmidt, "The Silent Witness: The Visual Arts in the Service of the Church," *Issues in Christian Education* 40, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 17.

⁶ "Eastern Orthodox church architecture." See also "Exploring Inside an Orthodox Church," accessed April 10, 2018, http://stdemetriosdaytona.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Brochure_Inside-the-Church.pdf.

⁷ For more information about the Epitaphios, please refer to "Epitaphios (liturgical)" from Wikipedia, accessed April 10, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epitaphios_\(liturgical\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epitaphios_(liturgical)).

worship. Dyrness insists, “Making beautiful forms is theologically connected to our call both to listen and respond to God in prayer, praise, and sacrament.”⁸ He believes that Protestants should reclaim a biblical understanding of art:

It is true that the Protestant imagination has been nourished uniquely by the spoken and written Word, and therefore, we tend to think that everyone must be spiritually and morally nourished in the way that we (and our forebears) have been. Surely these verbal means are of critical importance. But our children and their friends have been raised in a different world; they are often uninterested in our traditional word-centered media. Instead, they are looking for a new imaginative vision of life and reality, one they can see and feel, as well as understand... we must listen carefully to this generation and reread Scripture in the light of their dreams and fears. Then perhaps we will present the gospel and plan our worship in ways that response to their request and reintegrate word and image.⁹

I experienced a surprising piece of visual art on Holy Friday in a Korean church where I worked as a worship pastor. During the sermon, the senior pastor brought a big wooden cross, and he hammered nails into the cross. The visual aspect of seeing the cross was moving, but it was the sound of the hammering that broke the congregation’s heart. The process of hammering nails into the cross made the congregation meditate profoundly on the pain of Christ. The senior pastor noticed more tears in worship due to music and rich imagery linked with scriptural texts and theological themes. He said, “It has moments that are indelible and heartbreaking. All generations could experience God’s love by watching artwork and hearing the sound. It was, without a doubt, unforgettable.” All generations receive messages in different ways when stimulated by visual art and reflecting upon what they saw and heard, gaining a memorable experience to talk about afterward with others. Moreover, the senior pastor notes that the audio and visual stimulation caused by his hammering made the themes of the sermon more memorable. In addition to the stimulation provided by the sermon, there was an emotional catharsis that results from powerful sensory impressions. Accordingly, the congregation was touched and drawn deeper into the sermon through visual art and music.

Visual art has the power to trigger our experience to understand and remember worship. In this respect, Ruth C. Duck writes, “Visual arts can express human agony and joy and witness to divine love and grace in ways that go beyond words.”¹⁰ Therefore, the beauty of visual arts can provide significant theological meanings and insights that move the heart and soul toward Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Toward Reverence

The service I attended started at 7:00 pm, was quite long, about three hours, and the congregation, knowing this, did not arrive at a set time. Instead, people came when they could. Moreover, when they arrived, even though a ritualized service was taking place before them, they greeted friends and family in pews, chatted, kissed, milled about, and led their children to the beautifully decorated *Epitaphios* canopy for a kiss and a prayer with bowed head. The people were interesting. They were mostly white, but there were several African

⁸ William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁰ Ruth C. Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21st Century* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 90.

Americans, East Asians, and Hispanics. There were babies, children, and teenagers, and many older people, too. Most men were formally attired, and most of the women wore skirts or dresses.

There were more than 150 people, including the bishop, two priests, some deacons, and the four chanters who help to sing some of the parts of the service in black robes. The young boys were altar servers, too. They carried the cross, five candles, and liturgical fans in processions during the service. There was also a small choir on the second level at the back. Accompanied by an organ, the choir took turns singing specific hymns as agreed upon ahead of time. The bishop, assistant priest, and the four chanters each took turns reading from a Greek Orthodox Holy Week & Easter services book (chapter in Great Friday Evening) for the whole service. They spoke in English and switched back and forth to Greek. They used Greek more than English; the ratio was 60:40. When a bishop was presiding, the priests assisted him at the bishop's throne. There were three types of impressions involved in the service. First, the four chanters were reading the rich texts, scriptures, and hymns in a melodic half-singing and half-chanting. The beautiful chanting continued for more than one hour as the room slowly filled up. Second, the bishop and two priests wore colorful vestments, and the bishop had a golden crown with a crosier. Finally, the bishop, two priests, and a couple of the readers all wore beards, and the congregation stood up and then sat back down as directed by the bishop, and he blessed the community three times while walking around the sanctuary burning incense. Orthodox Christians have different perspectives on the matter of dress; the bishop, two priests, some deacons, the four chanters, and the congregation's respectable dress and appearance demonstrate they stand in awe of God and their service is not a personal representation of their opinions or attitudes, but rather a means to worship God: to honor, glorify, revere, and show their love of faith to Christ and his Church.

The service includes what is called the lamentations.¹¹ The four chanters began with the singing of "God is the Lord" and the troparion "The Noble Joseph." Troparia are the chanted hymns of the Orthodox Church.¹² The tone was mournful, while attention was focused on Christ's tomb and his sacrifice. The mood was also solemn as the four chanters chanted. The hymns contemplate a dialogue between the Virgin Mary and Christ, and the lament was somber in tone:

Son: Lament not for me, Mother, as you behold me in the grave. I am you son whom you conceived in your womb without seed. I shall rise and I shall be glorified.

Mother: My eternal son, I escaped suffering at your remarkable birth and was so marvelously blessed. And now, beholding you, my God, a breathless corpse, I am torn apart with the spear of bitter sorrow. But arise that I may be magnified by you!

Son: The earth, O my Mother, covers me by mine own will but the gatekeepers of Hades trembled seeing me clothed in a blood-spattered robe of vengeance; for as God I have struck down the enemies with the cross, and I will rise again, and magnify you.¹³

¹¹ The Lamentations have verses (troparia) called the "Praises" interspersed with verses of the 118th Psalm (17th kathisma), which is divided into three parts (staseis). For more information, visit the site "The Lamentations Service for Holy Saturday Matins," accessed April 13, 2018, <http://orthochristian.com/78602.html>.

¹² See *Greek Orthodox Holy Week and Easter Services, A New English Translation*, compiled and translated by Father George L. Papadeas (South Daytona, FL: Patmos Press, 2007), 373.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 386-387.

Not long after that, the congregation held up their candles and chanted phrases of lamentation. Then the Virgin Mother's voice was heard again, vocalized by a small choir: "My son, how can I bury you? ... Who shall give me water and a fountain of tears, that I may weep for my sweet Jesus?" After a while, she again lamented: "O Life, do not belong among the dead." Interspersed in the lamenting, she asked: "O my sweet springtime, my sweetest child, to where has your beauty vanished? ... O Light of my eyes, my sweetest child, how are you now covered in the grave? ... Arise, O Giver of Life."¹⁴ This lament expresses the deep sadness of the mother weeping for her dead son, Christ. Also, it represents her belief that Christ will rise from the dead. In other words, beauty and sincerity permeated the chanting and voices of this lamentation of her faith. Then the bishop took to the podium and began to deliver a sermon with the microphone. He spoke for no more than ten minutes, speaking first in Greek and then switching to English. He applied the day's readings about Psalm 119, which glorifies God as "the Resurrection and the Life" and reminds us of his humble entry into death. It was as good a sermon as I might expect to hear from an Evangelical pastor. After the Great Doxology, the winding sheet was carried in procession around the church while the congregation sang "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us" three times.¹⁵

The entire congregation sang the lamentation hymns, and a solemn procession around the church took place with the cross and the *Epitaphios*. Following the service, the flowers from the canopy were distributed to the congregation. The bishop, two priests, altar boys, choir, and all the faithful gathered around the Tomb (*Kouvouklion*) of Christ and sang the lamentation hymns again. These are a collection of doleful chants bemoaning Christ's Passion called the *Epitaphios* lament, which describes Christ's death, the emotions of his sorrowing mother, and the occasion of the Lord's descent into Hades, through which humanity was recalled from corruption and permitted to continue into everlasting life. At the end of the procession, the *Epitaphios* was brought back into the sanctuary and placed on the holy altar. The service was completed by the reading of the prophecy in which the resurrection is heralded.¹⁶ After the final glorification of the Trinity, the proclamation of salvation in Christ's resurrection echoed through the sanctuary. Finally, we were brought back to the present moment by a Gospel reading (Matthew 27:62-66).¹⁷ This service began solemnly, but the congregation was joyously anticipating the resurrection of Christ by its end.

Conclusion

In the liturgical setting, beautiful art evokes reverence, enabling us to play a role in God's ongoing creativity in the world, and giving us a sensory experience that complements and enlivens worship.¹⁸ In her book, *Spaces for Spirit: Adorning the Church*, Nancy Chinn observes, "...[Great art's] primary function is to serve the liturgy, to make it come alive in a new way."¹⁹ Correspondingly, visual orientation for worship creates a new environment that reflects the theological meanings and values in faith and life. Moreover, the melodic and rhythmic sing-chanting of the texts, scriptures, and hymns was in all a beautiful experience. A deep sense of reverence pervading the lamentation, and a proclamation of joyously the

¹⁴ Ibid., 388-393.

¹⁵ Ibid., 400.

¹⁶ For example, a prophecy was read from Ezekiel 37:1-14.

¹⁷ *Greek Orthodox Holy Week*, 405-408.

¹⁸ See Paul Grime, *Liturgical Preaching: Contemporary Essays* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 199. See also, Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God*, 90.

¹⁹ Nancy Chinn, *Spaces for Spirit: Adorning the Church* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998), 40.

resurrection of Christ overwhelmed me. All in all, I deeply felt God's presence throughout the worship service.