

# FULLNESS OF JOY

by Bethany Lancaster

As a child, I was taught to admire art. Beauty was a way to experience God, whether in a museum, concert hall, or out in nature. On Sundays, however, beauty was considered a distraction. I grew up attending a small, non-denominational church that started in a middle school gym and later graduated to a chapel designed and built by the church body. The sanctuary was a windowless and utilitarian space, partly to keep costs down, but also to make sure focus was kept on the Scripture. I remember anytime we prayed or were encouraged to reflect, I would close my eyes tightly and try to corral my attention. Those times at church felt stifled and taxing for me, and I felt guilty that the quiet time habits developed at home didn't seem to translate to rich self-reflection at church.

During this period of spiritual stagnation, I began freelancing as a harpist. One of the first church services for which I was hired to play was Tenebrae at a small Disciples of Christ church. The sanctuary was hexagonal, with a beautiful pipe organ protruding from the wall opposite the stage. A string quartet, bassist, flutist, oboist, and myself gathered around the organ to form a small orchestra pit, while the choir stood behind us. Each wall had a stained glass pane that filled the center, stretching floor to ceiling, and every other wall of the sanctuary had a peak filled with more abstract color. The stained glass cast primary colors across the black walls, but soon that light display dimmed with the sunset.

We performed Dubois' *Seven Last Words of Christ*, and after each movement, a candle was extinguished. The audience sat surrounding the musicians, facing the stage, and with each solemn piece and dark chord, the weight in the room grew. Music bound me to the audience members, and I could feel their grief. It was my first Good Friday experience. When everyone quietly filed out at the end of the service, I had a better understanding of why Easter is so glorious. I had been taught to pray with my eyes closed, to block out the world around me and enter a spiritual space. That Tenebrae service taught me the importance of praying with my eyes open, drinking in beauty to commune with God.

God created us to have emotions, to feel things, to be perceptive of beauty, and why should we not worship him in those things? We can fear our emotions because they can overwhelm us. We worry that we might be led astray by feelings, and so we seek to control them. While we shouldn't be ruled by our emotions, constantly trying to control them hinders our relationship with God. There is no shortage of ways to connect with God; fine art is not necessary for heartfelt worship. But, I believe art and the beauty it creates allows us to be overwhelmed by emotion, while keeping us from self-absorption. Sublime art reminds us that the omnipotent Creator wants to commune with us through every avenue; that He gives us good and beautiful things; that He invites us to create with Him.

Classical music has become devotional for me. Some of the most powerful encounters I've had with God have come through listening to and performing music. It acts upon me. The sound crashes into my ears and floods my mind. It arrests my attention, and in doing so, leaves me defenseless. In Classical music, there are often no lyrics to convey the message, or they might be in an unfamiliar language. For me, this mixture of being surrounded by beauty without a clear goal leads me into joy or into distress. In my defenseless state, I can be forced to face my fears, but God meets me there. He shows me something new in our relationship, or reminds me of His presence, and I'm led once again into joy.

One of the things I love about being Anglican is the way in which our tradition engages our minds and bodies. There's poetry in the liturgical prayers, and there's visual artistry in the different vestments, altar settings, and seasonal dossals. Anglicanism invites us to pray with our eyes open. We are called to taste and see that the Lord is good, and we can feel that goodness deeper still by allowing art to move us out of our selves into His presence.



*Saint Cecilia, a Roman martyr who became the patroness of music and musicians. Painting by Belgian François-Joseph Navez (1787-1869)*

