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Worldview of Music and Worship

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Visit to a Lutheran Church

On Sunday, March 6th, the first Sunday in Lent, I attend a Divine Service at Immanuel Lutheran Church in the Upper East Side, at 122 East 88th Street, New York, NY 10128. This is a beautiful gothic church, and a historical building built by German immigrants in 1886.

According to the Church website, the bell tower is 200 ft. high, and houses three bells inscribed Glaube, Hoffnung, and Liebe (Faith, Hope, and Charity), which were a gift to the new congregation from the Empress of Germany in the late 1800s. On the inside, there are ornate wooden carved sculptures in the altar, which were hand-carved in the Black Forest of Germany. There are also beautiful stained-glass windows.

When I entered the church, I almost felt like I was stepping into the 16th century, in the times of Martin Luther, the founder of the Lutheran Church. I was surrounded by the old-time tradition, reflected in the architecture of the space, and noted the feel of reverence, silence, and order that preceded the service. I observed that the congregation was mainly made up by elderly people and just a few families. Most people were dressed in formal clothes. It seemed like a close-knit community. I found that everything about the service was very well planned, calculated, and there was nothing that was spontaneous or emotional; the service flowed with austerity and flawless perfection according to the established plan.

The order of the service conformed to the Four-Fold elements of: entrance, service of the Word, Table, and dismissal. The structure of the service and prayers were almost identical to that of the Roman Catholic church. The service was officiated by two Reverends, one of them was a female pastor. I observed that some of the liturgy prayers were worded only very slightly differently, but the content was exactly the same. It is probably because Lutherans follow the Lutheran Book of Worship for hymns and liturgies.

Regarding the music, there was a wonderful classical choir, mainly made up by elders of the church; they sang accompanied by the choir director that played both the piano and the organ, switching from one to the other depending on the musical piece. The choir sang classical hymns, the Psalm, and the usual sang prayers in English and Latin. The organist played some instrumental pieces at the beginning and at the end of the service, mainly by German composers. There were some chanting pieces performed by the reverend and echoed by the choir.

The call for service started with the instrumental prelude “Erbarm Dich Mein” by Heinrich Bach (1615-1692) played by the organist.

Pastor Carol Fryer approached the center aisle and recited the Act of Contrition. The Pastor gave the absolution for sins, in the name of the Father, the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Then the Entrance Rite started to play. The Hymn was “The Glory of These Forty Days” which was suited to the theme of the commencement of Lent, and illustrated Jesus' fast and pray for forty days in the desert.

This was followed by the chanting of the Trisagion (from Mass in Honor of Saint Luke) by the Pastor and the Choir, followed by the prayer of the day.

The service of the Word started with the First reading from the Old Testament.
(Deuteronomy 26:1-11)

Psalm 91:1-2,9-16 was sung by the choir and the congregation.

The second reading was from the New Testament (Romans 10:8b-13, NRSV).

The Holy Gospel was by Luke 4:1-13 RSV was read by the Pastor, and followed by “Glory to you O Lord” sang by the choir and the congregation.

The Holy Gospel was about Jesus being led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness and resisting temptation. This reading clearly relates to the opening hymn “The Glory of These Forty Days”. The choice of this hymn, introduced the start of Lent, and reinforced the reading from the Scripture.

Then Hymn LBW 99 “Oh Lord, through these Forth Days” was sang after the Gospel of the Lord. Once again, the hymn chosen served to emphasize the theme of Lent.

After the Holy Gospel, a sermon by Rev. Gregory P. Fryer followed. It directly referred to the Holy Scripture reading, and elaborated on how we are tempted in our daily lives in the same way Jesus was tempted in the desert; the Pastor exhorted the congregation to overcome temptation with the help of the Holy Spirit. The Pastor referred to an old newspaper article and picture from a historical time, that was included in the bulletin titled “On the way up”, that tells the story of the steeplejack Edward Borden ascending the 220 feet-high church steeple to right the cross that had been bent over in a storm with high winds”. The Pastor stated this man’s climb to the cross represents all Christians working their way up to the cross, with great effort, and zeal to overcome the struggles in the steep climb to finally reach the divine. I thought this was a magnificent metaphor that illustrated our Christian journey.

The sermon was followed by the reception of three new members of the church, and after introductions, pastoral address, and affirmation of faith, the congregation joined them in reciting the Creed. A prayer for Intercession followed, and the service of the Table started with the

offering of the sign of peace and the collection. The Eucharistic Bread and Wine were brought to the altar, and the choir sang “Savator Mundi” by Palestrina (c.1525-1594) in Latin.

This was followed by the offertory prayer and then “The Great Thanksgiving” was sung, followed by “Holy, Holy, Holy”. After that, the consecration of the Holy Sacrament took place, followed by “Our Father’s” prayer, and “Agnus Day” was sung in English by the choir and the congregation.

The Holy Communion was distributed, whilst the choir sang the communion anthem “Lord, we beseech Thee” by Adrian Batten (1591-1637), followed by Hymn LBW341 “Jesus, Still Lead On” by Seelenbrautigam.

Finally, the dismissal took place with a Benediction and an invitation to go in peace and serve the Lord.

The recessional Hymn was “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”, by Ein Feste Burg.

The Postlude was Toccata in G by Heinrich Schneiderman (c.1595-16673).

The service lasted for one hour and a half.

In summary, I found that the Lutheran Church follows the Four-Fold Structure, and the order of service is very similar to that of the Catholic Church. The music, in tune with the great tradition of the Lutheran church, is deliberately chosen to fit the main theme of the season and serves to reinforce the message of the celebration and the sermon. Music also accompanies and elevates the liturgical prayers all throughout the service and gives thanks and praise to God. The styles of music in this church are classical church hymns, instrumental pieces, chanting call and response, alternating male with female voices. The congregation is encouraged to join in, and participate in worshipping God through song and prayer.