

Truth That Appears

Drama, Presence, and the Christian Imagination

*"We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."*

— T. S. Eliot



Caravaggio – The Calling of St. Matthew

Week Two — Drama – Truth in Action

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."
— John 1:14

Our Question

Why is drama more than entertainment?

We often use the word *drama* to mean theatre—or, more casually, conflict, excitement, or spectacle. But perhaps “drama” names something much deeper.

Drama occurs when meaning takes form in action: someone does something, something is at stake, events unfold in time, and someone witnesses what happens.

Christianity makes an extraordinary claim about truth. Truth does not remain an abstraction. The Word becomes flesh. Jesus calls Matthew and the other disciples, touches the sick, eats with sinners, confronts authorities, washes feet, breaks bread, suffers, dies, and rises again.

Christian truth is not merely stated.

It *happens*.

A Central Claim

Truth becomes dramatic when it is embodied in action before witnesses.

This may help us understand why Scripture so often gives us stories rather than propositions. Abraham leaves home. Jacob wrestles. Moses confronts Pharaoh. David faces Goliath. Job argues with God. Ruth remains with Naomi. Peter denies Christ. Jesus washes feet. Pilate asks a question. The women arrive at an empty tomb.

These actions do not merely *illustrate* theological ideas that could have been expressed more efficiently some other way.

The actions themselves disclose meaning.

Perhaps this is also true of the arts.

A painting asks us to look. A poem moves through language. Music creates expectation, memory, tension, and resolution in time. Dance gives meaning to bodily movement. A novel allows human choices to unfold before an imagined witness.

Perhaps all art is, in this larger sense, **dramatic**.

Scripture for Reflection

Read slowly this week, paying particular attention to **action**.

- Genesis 22:1–19 — Abraham and Isaac

- Exodus 3:1–15 — Moses and the burning bush
- Matthew 9:9–13 — the calling of Matthew
- John 8:1–11 — the woman accused
- John 13:1–17 — Jesus washes the disciples' feet
- Luke 22:54–62 — Peter's denial

As you read, don't ask only, “*What does this passage teach?*”

Ask:

What happens?

What does the action reveal that a proposition alone could not?

Works We Will Encounter

Caravaggio — *The Calling of St. Matthew*

Not simply a representation of a theological proposition. A moment occurs: a gesture, a look, a call, a response not yet completed. The painting is almost a frozen drama.

Excellent five minute video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-yxSjUvh0g8>

Jean Valjean and the Bishop — *Les Misérables*

The Bishop doesn't merely *tell* Valjean about grace. He **does something**. Grace becomes an action with consequences.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6e-qui-K-I>

Professional wrestling — *Shawn Michaels (Heartbreak Kid) v Undertaker Wrestlemania 25*

Not because “wrestling resembles drama”. Because it is drama: embodied action before witnesses, governed by convention, conflict, expectation, memory and consequence.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gd54flkPtL4>

John Cena – *You can't see me!*

<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/J2oOSGKEl8w>

Dance — *Mark Morris some Mozart dances*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZ_EjNCEluM

If drama is meaningful (and often intelligible) action unfolding in space and time before witnesses, why *isn't* this drama?

Hint: It is 😊

Music:

Gustav Mahler, *Symphony 5, fourth movement (Adagietto)*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bj6KLv7kv2Q&list=RDBj6KLv7kv2Q&start_radio=1

How can we even describe something that is so colossally dramatic? Perhaps all we can do is encounter it, as a Happening.

Bruce Springsteen – *The River*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHnZP2FmLCc&list=RDzHnZP2FmLCc&start_radio=1

Sinatra (live) – *I've got you under my skin*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqb5K4-GVnI&list=RDlqb5K4-GVnI&start_radio=1

George Strait – *I Saw God Today*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtTyOd3IyHo&list=RDMtTyOd3IyHo&start_radio=1

Does the narrator see God because the world has changed—or because an event has changed the witness?

Poetry:

Elizabeth Barrett Browning – *The Look*

<https://americanliterature.com/author/elizabeth-barrett-browning/poem/the-look>

BH Fairchild – *Rave On*

How can something that happens in time remain present after it has happened?

How can something that is “only imaginary” become part of what is real for us?

Drama and Conflict

Drama does not require violent conflict. It does not even require disagreement.

But it does require that **something is at stake**.

Something may be lost. Something may be discovered. Someone may refuse. Someone may surrender. Something anticipated may fail to occur.

And this may tell us something important about beauty.

Beauty need not mean always prettiness, harmony, or the absence of conflict. Sometimes beauty emerges because conflict has been neither ignored nor cheaply resolved.

Christianity itself makes this impossible to avoid.

The central Christian image is not an escape from suffering but a cross.

Is “Drama” Bigger Than “Art”?

This should be the intellectual center of the evening.

The category *art* immediately produces difficult boundary questions:

Is this art? Is that art? What qualities make something an artwork?

But perhaps we can begin somewhere else.

Instead of asking first whether something is *art*, ask:

What is happening here?

Who is acting?

Who is witnessing?

What conventions (including but not limited to gestures, techniques, motifs, phrases) make the action *intelligible*?

What is at stake here – and for whom?

What does the action make present?

Those questions work remarkably well for theatre. *But they also work for painting, music, poetry, dance, film, architecture, liturgy—and professional wrestling.*

Perhaps “drama” describes something fundamental about the arts that the modern category “art” sometimes obscures.

Questions for Conversation

- When does an action become meaningful rather than merely functional?
- How many times this week did we see *recognition* become meaningful?
- What does recognition do to your memories?
- Does drama require an audience?
- Does drama require conflict?
- What changes when truth is **enacted** rather than explained?
- Can a painting be dramatic even though nothing physically moves?
- Can instrumental music contain genuine dramatic action?
- Does knowing the conventions of an art form change what we are capable of witnessing?
- Is worship dramatic? If so, does calling it dramatic diminish it—or help us understand it?
- What might Christianity lose when Christian truth is reduced primarily to propositions?
- Is *drama* actually a more useful category than *art*?

Reading — Optional, But Encouraged

Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*

Chapter two, “*The Holy Theatre*”.

Kenneth L. Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama*

Chapter one, “*On Stage*”.

A Thought to Carry Into the Week

Week One ended:

“Perhaps the deepest purpose of art is not to tell us something we never knew. Perhaps it is to help us know the place where we already stand—for the first time.”

Week Two could deliberately answer it:

“Perhaps truth does not only ask to be seen. Perhaps truth asks to be enacted.”