

Ugly and beautiful

By [David Warkentin](#)

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Where do we see the holy? Where do we catch glimpses of grace? Where is God most present in our world? Maybe we think of grand cathedrals, where centuries-old art and architecture reflects the beauty and glory of God. Or perhaps an experience of nature, say a glimmering ocean sunset where the light dances to a tune of divine artistry. Possibly we consider our most precious relationships, the loving look of a spouse or the comforting embrace of a friend that speaks to embodied love and acceptance. God, grace, and holiness are all around us if we just take the time to look.

But rarely will we think of a dirty homeless person rambling in the street. Neither did actor [Ins Choi](#), who wrote and performs the provocative and moving one-person show called [Subway Stations of the Cross](#), inspired by his own encounter over a decade ago with a homeless ramblor. I had the pleasure of seeing Choi's performance this recently at [Pacific Theatre](#) in Vancouver.

While lacking a narrative structure—the play is described as an “unpredictable, mashed up meditation on the sacred and the everyday”—the show wasn't lacking in powerful moments of cultural insight and experience. The play is a series of ramblings as Choi embodies a nameless homeless man stationed on a cardboard mat, with only a ukulele and a microphone/speaker. Barefoot, and carrying a box that turns out to contain bread and wine, the man takes his stage and calls the audience to attention with a raw voice and words that were probably my highlight of the show: “Prepare ye the way of the Lord/Declare ye the way of the Lord/Chocolate éclair ye the way of the Lord.”

The man proceeds to sing and talk about life and meaning and society in an abrupt, gruff, eccentric, and highly creative way. Themes of socio-economic disparity, social stigma, and religious symbols are prominent but also not over simplified. “What can I do for you to love me?” is a question that resounds beyond the character's actual asking of it as everything from the sparse stage, somewhat random order of themes, and abrupt end speak to our unease in giving value to someone such as this. In our

discomfort—this is not an easy or even enjoyable play—we were left to experience the separation—and gift—of worthiness first hand.

Initially, I was disappointed as the show ended. It was shorter than I'd hoped and didn't seem to address enough of the actual experience of homelessness—I could have used a bit of biographical narrative from the character. But the more I've thought about it, the more I appreciate the end. The final scene (spoiler alert) offered an audible and visual display of the messiness of incarnation—the embodiment God in flesh (bread) and blood (wine) hanging from a subway station mic-stand mixed together in a bag. Silence at first. And then the refrain “prepare ye the way of the Lord.” There was dissonance. Audibly it was moving, but visually it was just plain ugly. Maybe even insulting to some. Bread and wine—holy elements!—flung into a mere bag to hang unadorned and plain amidst the mess of a city. Yet from my understanding of what incarnation truly means, visually, it was beautiful at the same time as it was ugly.

Through rambling song and insight, unpredictable and messy though it was, I got a glimpse of ugly and beautiful together.

Ugly and beautiful . . . incarnation. God with us.

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