

# A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Eric Howell

John 1

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Some words are just more important. You wouldn't be able to recognize them by thumbing through *Webster's Dictionary*. They wouldn't be in bold or italics. You won't find them on a year-end top ten list. It's not that the words hold within themselves a power—after all a written word is just a string of letters clumped together on a page. A spoken word is just a culturally defined means to express a mutually understood thought. You know, when you get down to it, a word is just a unit of language, consisting of one or more spoken sounds or their written representation, that functions as a principal carrier of meaning. Words are composed of one or more morphemes and are either the smallest units susceptible of independent use or consist of two or three such units combined under certain linking conditions. Words are usually separated by spaces in writing, and are distinguished phonologically, as by accent, in many languages. (I didn't come up with that.)

Words are important by how they are used. Every biblical reader knows that words have the power to create—"Let there be light." And there was light. Every middle schooler knows that words have the power to destroy.

For readers of the Bible, 'word' takes on a curious use in the gospel of John. We aren't used to seeing 'word' used this way. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In the original language, Greek, the word 'word' is actually '*logos*.' "In the beginning was the Logos and the Logos was with God and the Logos was God."

The term '*logos*' was in frequent use among the ancient Greeks. As a philosophical term it meant something like the 'world soul,' the soul of the universe. It was a creative energy. Some would say that all things came from it. Another might say that people derived wisdom from it. Someone else might say that it's eternal reason. They did not think of Logos as personal, so they never would have thought of it as somehow God. It was a principle or a force. It was the force that originated and permeated and directed all things. From logos we get logic, logical. Logos is that which orders the world.

So, according to John, "In the beginning was the Logos." Greek philosophers would have been fine with that. In the beginning was order. That's good. "And the Logos was with God." This would have been a step outside of mainstream Greek philosophical thought. But he was right in line with Jewish thought. When God acts, God speaks a word. Creation for example: "Let there be light" and there was light. God is consistent with God's words so it would be understandable to say that logos / word was with God. But John takes it even farther. "The Word was God and the Word became flesh among us." "The word wasn't just thought. Not just spoken. The word wasn't just written. The word wasn't just recorded. The logos—the ordering principal of the universe—took on life. In Jesus, the word—the power to create—became flesh.

Some words we use are just more important. Not because of anything inherent to the word itself but because of the way they have life.

Think with me about the words that have shaped your life.

“Congratulations, graduate!”

“I pronounce you husband and wife.”

“I’m pregnant. Twins. It’s a boy...and it’s a girl.”

“I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit.”

“Mom, can I borrow the car keys?”

“You’re hired.”.... “You’re fired.”

“She’s gone.”

“Friends and family, we are gathered here to remember and celebrate the life.”

“Welcome, good and faithful servant.”

Many of these words and phrases and many others have shaped our individual and families’ lives. But there are other words that are significant as well. They are words from our church community. Part of what we are trying to do here as a church is learn how to be church together such that our being and doing church becomes formative for how we do the rest of our lives. Our life together shapes our lives apart. And some words are important to us as a worshipping community. They shape us. They make us who we are together. They give us life. They are important for the way we worship the Word made flesh. If you are new to DaySpring, these words might be new to you. If you’ve been around a while, these words should be familiar. No doubt you’ll have others that you’ll think of, as well. They particularly describe worship. But the intentionality of DaySpring is that what we do in worship, we try to extend into every area of our life together seamlessly. If you know DaySpring’s worship, you’ll have a good sense of DaySpring. Our prayer, of course, is that if you know DaySpring, you’ll come to know Jesus.

Five words. The first is **community**, or maybe better put: **You’ve got mail**. Each week when we plan the worship service, we ask several DaySpringers to help lead. Usually we do this by email. So, you might get an email—Will you give the opening welcome? Read scripture? Lead us in prayer? Check your computer or answering machine because you may have an email or voice mail asking you to help. By involving different people in worship, we are honoring the very Baptist and particularly DaySpring commitments to leadership of lay people. This is your church. This is your worship.

When most of us think about church, we think about a building with programs, a parking lot, and a sign out front. When we think of worship, we think of preaching, singing, and scripture reading. But normative for Christian worship is a community of people gathered in a living room sharing the roles of worship together. You might hear about house churches today and they are a minority of ecclesial communities. But that’s the original church experience and

is theologically normative. One of the senses I have of our worship is that it's like we, all of us, are just gathered in a really big living room in someone's house to worship (architecture, dress, beginnings). This is our worship. This is your worship. Even if you aren't at the pulpit leading, you'll notice that many elements in our services ask you to sing or speak. DaySpring worship isn't for observers. It's not a production for an audience. This is your worship.

The next word is **lectionary**. Lectionary was a foreign word to me when I went to seminary, but I learned soon enough that the lectionary is a three-year cycle of scripture texts assigned to each Sunday. So each Sunday of the year has an Old Testament, a Psalm, a Gospel, and Epistle reading. The texts follow something called the church calendar, in which each year, beginning with Advent in late November or early December, follows an arc across the life of Christ, and indeed the story of God's work in the world. Advent. Christmas. Epiphany. Lent. Easter. Ordinary Time. Christ the King Sunday. And then back around again. The cumulative result is that in following the lectionary, we live the story again each year. This is a good lesson for us. The second is that we are brought into connection with churches around the world today and in our history that followed the same pattern. This is also a good lesson. The main benefit is that we learn to order our time differently. By following the lectionary and the church seasons with its changing colors, decorations, and lessons we become worshippers who have a little different sense of our location as those who follow in the steps of a deep and wide tradition and as those for whom the story is fresh in our lives with every telling.

The third word you'll see on our website, but may be somewhat unfamiliar to many of us: **Contemplative**. What does that mean? We say we are in the contemplative tradition, which believes that the knowledge of God is a gift of God, which comes as the result of meditation upon the word and resting in the presence of God. In this rest, the mind and heart are still, but are beginning to practically experience what they have sought or learned about in the scriptures. When I was living in Virginia, many Saturday mornings we drove into town to City Market. It was a farmer's market on steroids. Actually, it was a farmer's market without steroids. Organic, naturally, locally produced fruits and vegetables sold along side local crafts, while the local Democratic and Libertarian politicians worked the crowds and kissed babies. With all these fresh vegetables, fruits, and homemade breads and cheeses around, we went straight for the fresh hot doughnuts. Probably says something about us. One of the things I learned about, though, was the Slow Food movement. The Slow Food movement focuses on cooking, actually cooking local foods and supporting local farmers. It's about how you cook and how you eat. In contrast to Fast Food where the goal is to input as many empty calories as possible as cheaply as possible, Slow Food is about intentionally slowing down, even to the point of inconvenience. You might say that contemplative worship is slow worship. I have a friend who as a teenager traveled to Italy with her grandmother one summer. She describes how frustrated she was with Grandma, who lingered over her meals—breakfast, lunch, and dinner—when all my friend wanted to do was grab something and go see the sights. But Grandma had a philosophy of chewing. She said you should chew each bite thirty times before swallowing. Every bite. We sort of have the same philosophy here. Slow down. Chew your spiritual food. Taste it and take it in. When we chime the hour at 11:00, for many of us it's a moment of slowing down, taking a deep breath, and opening our minds to contemplate what deep riches the Spirit has for us today.

The fourth word is a necessary ingredient to contemplative worship: **Silence**. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that all theology begins in silence. We'd be wise to return there more often. I

think of worship like canoeing down a beautiful river. When I was a kid, my dad and I took a canoe trip with the Boy Scouts down the beautiful Brazos River. I don't know who had this great idea, but he should lose a Dad badge from his shirt. We canoed the Brazos in the summer. In a drought. Which meant that we spent most of the trip carrying our canoes over our heads, while we walked and stumbled on the rocky, empty riverbed beneath our feet. Where there was supposed to be water, there was no water. The river was empty / dry. Without water, it wasn't a canoe trip; it was work, because canoes are meant to float in the water, just as worshippers are meant to rest in God. Silence in worship is the trust that there's always living water in the river of God. We don't have to carry worship on our shoulders. We don't have to paddle like crazy to make worship happen. It happens because God is already here. When we come and we set down our canoes heavy-laden with the weight of the world, God's spirit holds them up and takes us. We do not believe that the elements in worship make the worship. We believe that in entering this space and time we are entering into worship, we are entering God's eternity and joining the unending praise of the saints in heaven. "Holy holy, holy is the Lord God almighty, who was and is and is to come." The elements just help move us down the river a bit. Each part of the service is like we are dipping our paddle in the water and pulling just a bit. But the water is already there, carrying us along. We think worship is like floating. Occasionally we'll have an element—a prayer, song, or sermon to move us along the way, but what happens here is much more about letting the river take us where it will and resting in it.

Four words that are DaySpring: **Community. Lectionary. Contemplative. Silence.** All four of these are our choice. We make these happen week by week. This is how we do what we do. One last word is the hope that fulfills all the other words. It's not one that we can plan or organize or predict or create. It's God's to give and only God's to give. **Sacred.** Worship is not automatically sacred because it's simple or because we sing certain songs in a certain way or because it's yours or the church year or because we have silent contemplation. It's not sacred because we might eschew video or electric guitars. Candles or chants, nothing we do makes it sacred. We can no more make worship sacred than a human can become God. Ah, but God can become human. The Word can take flesh. And the Sacred can infuse our worship. All of the other words—community, lectionary, contemplative, silence—only open ourselves to the sacred. Only God makes it sacred. Only God can give this gift. Without God all our silence is just quiet. Without God, all our words are just one or more morphemes. Without God all our best intentions are just different ways of carrying fancy canoes. When we say worship is sacred, we are saying that we are desperately open to the movement of God's Spirit in our lives together and our lives apart and what we do in worship is an attempt to be more open and to ready ourselves to hear God's word as it comes. When we say worship is sacred we mean that we have experienced the sacred here in community, the lectionary, contemplation, and silence. Faith is born and renewed. Grace and forgiveness are experienced and received. Commitments to Christ are deepened. Hearts are slowly mended. God is near. When we say worship is sacred, ultimately, we mean that the space created by the things we do gives us room to see and hear and sense the presence of God. Week by week we are restored in faith that the light still shines in the darkness and the darkness still has not overcome it and never will.

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