

# A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Regina Easley-Young

Matthew 2:1-12

January 11, 2009

Well, DaySpring, 2008 has been quite a year, hasn't it?

We welcomed a new pastor and his family.

We have said goodbye to friends; we have dedicated babies.... It's becoming what we're known for.

We have continued to weed, mow, clean, call, cry, laugh, email, sing, Pray, and most importantly, we have continued to worship.

As Eric said in his letter to the church on the last day of 2008, "The simple act of worship just might be what is most needed." (EH)

And so today, as we travel on our way to Epiphany, I'd like to begin with worship.... Here's the question for you: What brings you to worship?

Is it to be with your friends? Is it because your parents make you come?

Is it habit? .... The week just cannot start right until you have attended worship at church?

Is it to express your gratitude to God, the giver of all good gifts?

To praise God? To gather as the church?

Is it to be together, to sit with your brothers and sisters in Christ as church, as the Body of Christ?

What brings us here, Sunday after Sunday? Week after week?

Let's see...why do I come? Because I get paid to come?

Because my week wouldn't be the same without it?

To see my friends?

Habit?

I may come for all the reasons listed above, but I have a hunch; no, I know for sure, why I come, even if I don't acknowledge it (say it out loud). I come because I want my life to change.

In last week's sermon, remember what Eric said.... We experience in this worship service the elements that are to be part of our daily lives. We practice in here what we live out there.

To put it this way: If we have five minutes of silence, of practicing contemplative prayer in here every week, you can have ten minutes of letting go of our addictive thoughts out there every day.... It's the training ground for how to live...

*Call to worship and the chiming*...the time to stop our busyness, stop what we're doing; allow a holy pause to settle us down, both body and mind. We begin to be still. We allow ourselves to sit and recognize where we are; we hear each chime and, if we let them, we can let those chimes call us to go deeper and deeper into that still place in our souls. We begin to breathe with each chime.

*Silence*...silence births prayer...the contemplative chewing takes place... we stop; we read the reflection for the Ministry of Silence and a word or a phrase catches our attention, and we know it was meant for us to read; it settles somewhere in us.

*Listen*...to sacred words, to the Holy Word...to inspired music...and sometimes we hear the turn of a note on the piano, a chord that makes our hearts ache...it is so moving and beautiful, an epiphany, an appearance for our souls heard something out of the ordinary—words in the sermon enlighten us...we were listening with different ears and something in us shifted.

We *praise* God by singing, we *proclaim* by reading our theology of who the church is, who God is. We stand, we voice; we read together the words of our tradition, reminding us that God is Creator, Almighty, and to be recognized as such. We read the words of our tradition that have grounded us through the centuries. We remember.

We *confess* our sins, confess who we are and who we want to be; we acknowledge that we need Someone Greater than we are; we confess what we have done and not done; we confess before God and before one another. We confess that we are a tangled mess. This is a place of surrendering our shadow selves, our brokenness...of saying to God and saying with our brothers and sisters that we need God...we are all the same.

We *pray* for one another; we pass to one another the peace of Christ as we look into each other's eyes.... The peace of Christ be with you.....(peace that passes all understanding; peace be still; peace I leave with you, not as the world gives....). The eternal peace of Christ is what we say to one another...we are the presence of Christ to one another and then we leave to be the presence of Christ to the world. A powerful moment.

Did you get it? This is profound soulwork that we do every week...it is intentional.... We grow still and quiet. We breathe. We listen. Something shifts. We remember. We confess. We pray. We bless.

Already, we have lived differently for this one hour.  
Give us ears to hear, eyes to see...

We engage in these practices in here so that we can grow in awareness, in discipline, and in encouragement in the dailyness of our lives...or as a friend said this week in the comfortable chaos of our lives. We do this in this service week after week so that we can learn to get ourselves out of the way in order to see God. As Cynthia Bourgeault says, we do this to put a stick in the spokes of our thinking, our habits.... This is what we do, what we say, and what I believe we come for week after week. And we come not of our own doing; did you know that? We have a Divine Invitation, a Star, that draws us, and we follow. There is a magnetism inside ourselves.... We come in response to a call (Bourgeault) because something has to be different for us if we worship, doesn't it?

Thomas Merton says that this is "a call from Him Who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being: for we ourselves are words of His... we are words that are meant to respond to Him, to echo Him... God answers Himself in us" [with] a transformed life, all things made new.... We follow this call because something in us knows that we have so much that needs to be different.... We act out of the same old patterns of thinking and acting year after year; day after day; relationship after relationship.... This is what brings us here, longing to leave here differently, to go home changed.

So, you may be asking...

What does this have to do with epiphany?...with the Epiphany we celebrate today that is the divine manifestation of God to the world? The appearance, the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles...to the entire world?. The Light in the Darkness? The story of the wise men who followed a Star to the Christ Child?

They followed this Star and they worshipped...they worshipped.

In silence, in praise, in offering their exhaustion, they brought gifts they had been carrying for maybe years...the earthiness of their destination humbled them, but the Star shone brightly, revealing to them the Divine. They encountered God in a most ordinary holy of holies. Their lives would never be the same. The world would never be the same.

And so we worship. We follow that call, that star; we come to this beautiful place that is quiet, simple, sacred. We come to outwardly slow down, to inwardly bow down, offer our gifts and in humility say, "I need You." This is the beginning of our transformation...to confess our brokenness, our humanity, to surrender, to self-empty, to give over and place at the feet of Christ what we have been carrying for years...what keeps us from seeing the Divine. This self-emptying is a prerequisite of sorts for God's appearance to us...we empty, we shed, we molt our outer skin, like a molted snakeskin.... It's a perfect form of what it once contained...but it's left behind. It's not needed any longer, because new growth is taking place. We shed, we surrender so that we can see the Divine...so that we can get the log out of the road; we get ourselves out of the way...the inner becomes the outer.

Richard Rohr says the "school of the inner life becomes the outer life." The seesaw of life.... How I operate in here is how I operate out there.

We need an epiphany in our lives...and I'm not using this word lightly.... I really do mean a divine revelation.... I need that. You need that. And we can have them if our eyes are open, if our ears are open.... Our lives are like we are in the clouds, and we rise, and rise and we really will come out of the clouds eventually to be bathed in sunlight.... Now, there will be another layer of clouds, no doubt, but there will be clarity again, too. That clarity, that light, may be the size of the sun, or it may be the size of a pinhole, but still, it pierces the darkness. The Divine cannot not be seen.

We are in the clouds, the shadows of ourselves; we have to say it and face it, and when we do, then, as Rohr says, we will not be surprised or disappointed with others' shadows. It is hard to go walking around in a vigilante stance looking for others' faults and sins when we are in a posture of lifting our hands up in humility. The inner life becomes the outer.

Bringing, if we're honest, our old, well-worn, dusty, and imperfect patterns...our patterns of thinking that have been our companions for a lifetime.... We bring with us every week what we think we should hide, what we're embarrassed about—our need for admiration, self image, control, fear; we bring gifts of thinking we're not enough; struggling relationships, need for busyness and noise. These are what we believe prevents us from worshipping.

But you see, these are exactly what bring us to worship.... They are precisely the gifts that we need to be transformed.... These are what we need bathed in the Light of God. And this is the mystery that draws us here.

We are all invited to lay down our lives...to surrender what keeps us from God and from others. Remember that from that newborn crib of stubble and hay, the infant child already had a “reach of grace” that still reaches all the way to us here and now, today. “[That] Christ child who attracted these odd Magi to his cradle would later have the same magnetic effect on a Samaritan adulteress, immoral prostitutes, greasy tax collectors on the take, despised Roman soldiers, and ostracized lepers.” (Scott Hoezee) Does he not draw us to himself today, oh, all of us of little faith?

And we are not without the Divine Example (thoughts below this from Ronald Rolheiser). Isn't the secret to this divine love, the transformed life, the life of Christ, himself? Isn't it the wisdom of the Cross and the Crucified One? His love was most truly revealed in the brokenness on the cross. He became human and offered himself as a gift, a sacrifice... Here at his crib-side, we must remember not only his birth, but also his death.....

Isn't crucifixion of the private ego the route to empathy and compassion?

Isn't it when we are vulnerable and unable to impress or overpower others that we are finally open to relationship, intimacy, love?

Isn't forgiveness of those who have hurt us the final manifestation of human maturity?

Isn't surrender, self-sacrifice, the refusal to protect myself, in the end, the real way love shows itself?

It is the wisdom of the cross that leads us...this is our star....

It is in surrender, the life that is birthed out of pain and suffering where there is a life that shines most brightly from within.

This is what the Divine calls us to...we cannot hold on to our lives in what is called the “ever-present fragrance of death.” (D. Defenbaugh)

So, come to the place to unload your treasures.

You are the treasure...all that you have been, all that you are, all that you will be.

Arise! Shine! Your light has come....

You are the treasure; you are the gift, and so is all that you carry...your heartbreak, your sadness, your shame, your anger and fears; your disappointment with life and with others; your sorrow...they are all gifts to bring. So,

Bring them all...offer them as precious treasures and let them be transformed. These are your gifts that when surrendered just might shine with the Love and the Light of God.

From Mary Oliver's poem, entitled, “The Uses of Sorrow:”

*Someone I loved once gave me  
A box full of darkness.*

*It took me years to understand  
That this, too, was a gift.*

After worshipping, the Magi went home by another way.

May your gifts illuminate and show you the way.

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