

**A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church**  
**“A Liturgy of Identity”**  
**By Eric Howell**  
**Deuteronomy 26:1-11**  
**February 21, 2010**

A congregation that observes the Church calendar is one that, over time, begins . . . possibly . . . maybe . . . to live into the gospel. The gospel story becomes the determinative reality of life. It sets the pattern, the rhythm, the vision, the reality of life. We live into the story. That’s what is happening today on the first Sunday of Lent.

Easter is a time when people have been baptized, so Lent has been a time of preparation for baptism, when those who were ready to give their hearts and lives to Christ were prepared, taught, readied for their baptism. The practice of preparation extends further than just the candidates for baptism. It is a time of preparation for all of us. You don’t just want to wake up Easter morning. You want to hunger for it, yearn for it. If you really want to experience Easter, you’ve got to attend Good Friday services. If you really want to live into the experience of Good Friday, well . . . you’ve got to journey there with Christ and one another.

So we begin this journey today with colors that are changed, songs that are a bit different. The prayers are different, too. This season of Lent is a serious, introspective season that invites each of us to look inward to our sins and shortcomings, to look backward to remember the life and ministry of Jesus and His own journey to the cross, to look up to renew our devotion to God, to look forward toward Easter, to look outward to others around us whose own pain and searching are cross-shaped.

As we tell the story and live into the rhythms of the story, the church becomes the story for a postmodern world that has no story. In the past the church offered the gospel as self-evidently good news for people who were looking for meaning, purpose, direction, significance in their lives. The gospel completed the lives of people like that last missing puzzle piece under the sofa. We could say, “You know that story you think you are living out? Here’s the turning point and outcome of it.” But we live in a world now that does not remember its past and has little vision of its future. It is a world increasingly disconnected from any sense of a larger narrative. And people are wired for narrative. Did you hear about the people who got depressed after they saw the movie Avatar? Not the people who were depressed because they thought it was a dumb movie. People got depressed because with the 3-D and the amazing visuals, the movie invited you into a world that is idyllic and unreachable for distressed earthlings. When people entered the Avatar world, they dreamed of it and didn’t want to leave. When they emerged blinking, back in the potholed parking lot, they remembered the world they actually inhabit isn’t always all that great a lot of the time.

Where is the church in their lives? Where is the gospel story painting the picture not of amazon blue people, but of the New Jerusalem populated with fallen and redeemed people like us?

The journey there begins with remembrance. Even as we are looking forward to Easter with its hope and promise, we look back closely at the life of Jesus and the story of redemption that God began telling at the foundations of the world.

The Old Testament book of Deuteronomy is a master of looking forward and looking back. The whole book is one long speech by Moses to the whole people of Israel before they entered the Promised Land. They paused in the wilderness, before going on over to the other side, to look forward to what is coming and remember where they had been.

We do that in our lives sometimes . . .

That's what those baby books are for. They tell the story of where you come from. Philosophers have fun with the question, "How do you know you are the same person as the kid in the photo album with the chili bowl haircut and the missing front tooth that shares your name?" You have kind of the same eyes, same chin. What connects you to that person? Just your story. Just the fact that you can tell about that kid and how he played soccer and then basketball, made those kinds of grades, went on that trip that summer, had a crush on that pig-tailed freckled girl. He worked this job and that and did thus and so. You can tell the story. That's how you know that kid became you.

Here at the end of their 40-year journey, looking forward to what is to come, Israel is told how to remember their story. Here's what you are going to do, Moses tells them . . . when you get into the land and you are growing your own fruit, and your first crop comes in, fill a basket with some of that fruit and take it to the priest and each of you should say this: "I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to give us."

Then the priest will take your basket, set it by the altar, and then you continue to tell the story. "My father was a wandering Aramean . . ."

Different commentators are divided as to whether this refers 1), to Jacob, who is here called an Aramean because his grandfather, Abraham, was originally from Aram, or because he spent many years in Aram hiding from his brother Esau and working for his father-in-law, Laban, or 2), to Abraham and his ancestors, who originally came from Aram. Most likely, it is a summary of the whole history to that point of the people. We were wanderers, not in our own land, rootless and searching, not defined by a location and a land, but by a narrative that bound us together with a common identity.

Abraham begat Isaac. Isaac begat Jacob. Jacob had a whole bunch of kids. Later his name would be changed to Israel. That's how they got that name. Together they were the family of Israel. Suffering through a terrible famine, Jacob moved the family to Egypt, invited there by the pharaoh who received the family as friends. Things went well for a while. Then the pharaoh died. And the new pharaoh didn't remember Jacob's sons and his family's friendship. They were just convenient slaves. So the descendents of Jacob, the Israelites, were put to hard labor, generation after generation. They were slaves in Egypt for 400 years, but they kept growing, and some kept remembering that

God had promised a land to be their own and they dreamed of freedom in an idyllic place, flowing with milk and honey.

An unlikely stammerer, Moses, became the man God used to deliver the people from Egypt. Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy together are the story of what happened next. Moses led the people out of slavery into the wilderness, where they spent the next 40 years. Joshua and Judges are the story of the people's entry into the land. Samuels, Kings, Chronicles are about the glory days of David and Solomon and other kings who ruled. Then later the nation runs into challenges from Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and then Rome. Then Jesus is born under Rome's rule. That's the Bible. All of that is later, but they always remembered this moment.

Today, toward the end of Deuteronomy, Israel stands on the banks of the Jordan River about to go home after so much wandering and suffering. They are about to go home. When you do, when you hold that first ripe fruit in your hand and are tempted to believe it is all yours because of your work, remember how you got here.

It was a history lesson. But it was more than that. It was an identity lesson.

Listen again to the liturgy of remembrance and notice the shifting pronouns from first person singular to plural, to second person to third person and back. Notice the mashup of 'I,' 'you,' 'we,' 'us' in the words that each person in the new land is to recite to the priest about a history that happened long before they were born.

"I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to give us. A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, our oppression. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt. And He brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O Lord, have given me."

It's a liturgy of identity. Who am I? That's a question a lot of people are asking today.

In an article published in the same year DaySpring was birthed ["How the World Lost its Story," *First Things*, October 1993], theologian Robert Jenson wrote that increasingly we live in a time when people have forgotten they have a story. People live moment to moment without a narrative that ties our lives together and ties our lives with those who have gone before and those who will come after and even ties our own lives together. When life is reduced to consumption, satisfaction, and personal pursuit, we become disconnected points rather than finding ourselves as part of something bigger than ourselves, something True.

The church in this age, then, must be the ones who remember, tell, and themselves become the story that invites all people to find their stories within its life. Stanley Hauerwas likes to say that the world's approach is that you have no story except the story

you chose when you had no story. The approach of Christianity is that we have a story we live into.

So Jenson writes, and remember this is the same year, and in fact the same month, DaySpring was busy being born:

In the postmodern world if a congregation wants to be ‘relevant’ here is the first step: It must recover the classic liturgy of the church, in all its dramatic density, sensual actuality, and brutal realism, and make this the one exclusive center of its life. In the postmodern world, all else must at best be decoration and more likely distraction. If the church is not herself a real, substantial, living world to which the gospel can be true, faith is quite simply impossible.

While Jenson was writing, DaySpring was being born as a place that found itself rediscovering the classic liturgy of the church and holding worship as the center of its life. What was being described is what we have experienced and what many of us have tried to articulate in different ways about why we feel drawn here. When I come here, I am not the most important thing here and that connects with something deep down inside that I desperately need in a week when every commercial and other pressures make me feel that what I’m asked to be is out of whack with who I am and that my true self is insignificant. Here I can rest and begin to find my true self in the gospel story.

Jenson goes on to say, “If in the post-modern world, a congregation wants to be relevant, going to church must be a journey to the place where we will behold our destiny, where we will see what will become of us. Church must become occasions of seeing.”

Your father was a wandering Aramean. Did you know that? Did you know your father was starving, had a pretty interesting if not really messed up, home life, had kids that tried to kill one another and sold one to a band of traveling gypsies? That’s your family and the family of the guy sitting next to you. That makes you brothers and sisters with each other. Did you know that your father took his family, out of desperation, into grave danger, and that your fathers and mothers made bricks out of straw and mud, quite against their will? Those are your parents. And you were there, too. That was you, toiling away at life, hopeless about the future, barely dreaming of a place and a time back in the unseen past.

Do you remember that? Do you remember what happened next? Do you remember the day Pharaoh let you go—the craziness, the chaos, the thrill of freedom was terrifying compared to the security of servitude. You weren’t sure you wanted it. You could die out there in the wilderness. And you almost did. The sea was in front of you and the angry army behind you. And the sea parted and you walked across on dry land. God was always making a way when there wasn’t any other way.

And then you wandered, and you cursed, and you complained, and you didn’t trust. But . . . let’s not tell that part of the story today. We know that’s always there. Let’s just talk about how God brought you through it all, every step of the way. And

brought you into the land, your home, and there was this fruit tree and then an offering basket and those words, “My father was a wandering Aramean . . .” Yes, he was.

And then remember those years of peace, and then those of trial. Remember how you thought the good times could never end, but they did. And only once they did, did you realize how far from the God who brought you out of slavery you had wandered. You had a general spiritual sensibility about you, but you were too quick to give your allegiance to anything that felt good in the moment. Remember when you lifted your eyes to the hills and wondered, “Where shall my help come from? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.” Remember when you remembered that first commandment, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, you shall have no other gods before Me.” Those were hard words, but they were good words because they were right words.

Remember exile and confusion? Remember return and elation? You were there. Remember the Romans. Remember the humble carpenter, so unlike the Romans, who taught unlike the scribes, He taught like He had authority. He treated people differently, the lepers, the blind, the lame. He was different. It was like He had wrestled with the devil and won a victory. It was like He wasn’t afraid of anything or anyone, not even the Romans. He had a single-minded focus. And you and others were drawn to Him. And then it was over. They killed Him. They killed Him.

Within just a few days, people said they saw Him. You were there. You heard. And people remembered His words at that supper, “This bread is My body broken for you. This cup is the new covenant in My blood.” And people, they called them Christians, would enter into that liturgy, remembering those words and would file forward to receive the bread and the cup, and they kept coming. And they are still coming today. One after another into a faith-story that is as ancient at the foundations of the world and as fresh as the baptismal water streaming off your head as you emerge from the former self that was lost into your new self that is found and claimed by something much bigger than yourself. It is as grounded as the apostle’s creed and as life giving as confessing, “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

This is our story. This is who we are. Our father was a wandering Aramean. Our savior was a crucified carpenter. You have had your wanderings, your wonderings, your exiles, your sin and your suffering. You have your story. And now, maybe enfolded in this season of remembrance and preparation, you will find your way back home.