

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Bless This House

Matthew 2

January 7, 2024

You've done a beautiful thing this morning, blessing this house in the way you have. To bless is a priestly act, giving a gift that is beyond you to give—you're taking part of it and allowing yourself to be a vessel of it. It's more than wishing someone well or saying something good, though it includes both of those. To bless is to be a vessel, in some mysterious way, of God's grace. Blessings abound this morning in the echo of epiphany words and the lingering scent of baked goods.

We usually think of blessing a person when they sneeze or blessing a meal or blessing a child at our baby dedications. Christians throughout the world say blessings on one another's homes on Epiphany Sunday. In some parts of the world, in small communities, the village priest will walk from house to house saying a form of blessing we said this morning. As he walks, children follow behind him. By the time he comes to the end of the village, he's leading a parade of happy children. Children love a parade no matter what it's for but don't underestimate their ability to understand this parade is special because they get to take part in giving a gift that's not really theirs to give. Even children, maybe especially children, who don't have much tangible to give, love to take part in bringing goodness to others in any way they can. And that's an important thing to remember in a year when we're going to be asked to bless this house in all kinds of ways, and you may feel like you don't have anything you can give. But you do. Because a blessing is a channel of a gift that is beyond you to give until you open yourself to both the gift and the one true Giver. This is grace.

On Epiphany, the end of the Christmas season celebrating the gift of God in the flesh, the gift is a prayer spoken. Words may seem like they don't carry much freight, but these words do. They carry meaning as significant as the wise men laying their gifts at the feet of the Christ-child. For the frankincense, gold, and myrrh and the words are gifts given freely and with love for what is and hope for what is to come. For the wise men, they set their gifts and knelt before him, who was and will be the king of kings.

For us, our blessings are prayers over our homes and our church. At the end of the Christmas season and beginning of the year, it is a gift to all of us to begin the year with a prayer of blessing over the places special to us.

Alexander Schmemman believed in the power of blessing. He wrote, "To bless is to accept in love, and to move toward what is loved and accepted. The Church thus is the assembly, the gathering of those to whom the ultimate destination of all life has been revealed and who have accepted it. This acceptance is expressed in the solemn answer to the doxology: Amen. It is indeed one of the most important words in the world, for it expresses the agreement of the Church to follow Christ in his ascension to his Father, to make this ascension the destiny of

man. It is Christ's gift to us, for only in him can we say 'Amen' to God, or rather he himself is our Amen to God and the church is an Amen to Christ. Upon this Amen, the fate of the human race is decided. It reveals the movement toward God has begun. (*For the Life of the World*, 38)"

On Epiphany, the movement toward God has begun though we are still at the very beginning. This is a time of year of new beginnings, of a year, this year, when we will bless this house with our words, with our actions, and with our contributions. Our words are our prayers, our actions are our acts of service, like those cinnamon rolls, and our contributions are toward building this campus. This is one of those pivotal years for the church. We will bless this house. And there will be many, many Amens because everything we do big or small is doxology: praising the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

There's something special about this place that is beyond us. We were reminded of that on Christmas Eve. In the morning, when Terry in our call to worship said, you can feel it here can't you, you can sense it, something special in this place. And in the evening in our Christmas Eve worship, that service was so special not just because families were reunited and together and because the place was bursting at the walls. But because somehow the place invited us in between these walls for a time into a timeless-ness, as sure as our small candles took part in the Light that illuminates all being since the opening words of creation. There was something special about that night. There was a door that swung open in the mystic.

Margaret Vissar understands the spirituality of a church in just this way. She writes, "A church is a recognition, in stone and wood and brick, of spiritual awakenings. It nods, to each individual person... It constitutes a collective memory of spiritual insights, of thousands of mystical moments. A church reminds us of what we have known. And it tells us that the possibility of the door swinging open again remains. (*Geometry of Love*, 1)"

I've returned to those words over the last few years as our planning, hope, and attention to the church grounds and the DaySpring campus has moved toward the moment we moving in now. This is a special place, the door of spiritual awakenings has swung open. And our prayer is that it swings ever more widely on an arc of hope for we who are here now, for our children, and for those who will yet come.

To bless the house of DaySpring is to bless the building and to bless the community and those who are part of it. This year, we bless this house. DaySpring is not a particularly old church. Our roots go deep into the community and into Christian heritage, but this assembly is now just over 30 years old. Already you can feel a rhythm to the church's life in about decade-long eras. Like music. Music is the sound, and it's the space between the sound. It moves in rhythm, and you can look back in our time and see how it's moved in rhythm, like music.

The first decade or so, this community of people grew and was shaped in a space that was not our own, and readiness grew for a place to call home. It was a season of improvisation. That era was a jazz improvisation. And the words of that era went something like:

It only takes a spark to get a fire going.

And soon all those around can warm up in its glowing.

That's how it is with God's love once you experienced it.

Words given to us and really, to all the world by beloved Kurt Kaiser.

Over the second decade or so, this farmland on the edge of town became DaySpring's home—and this sanctuary, our chapel, gathering rooms, and space for children and youth came to be, alongside the old watering trough that we re-christened as a baptistry. Everything that is here, except the old cow trough and water tower, was built over about 10 years by a community of people who didn't think they were really big enough to build what they were building. But their courage was always one or two steps ahead of their limitations. They did it for themselves and for one another. "It's time for us to have a place of our own," they said. And they did it for you. If you weren't here then, I mean the early 2000's, then realize, they did for this for you. And they didn't even know you nor did they know you would be here. But God did. It was exciting, pulsing with activity and joy.

With all that activity, that era musically was a punk rock jam of

that's how it is with God's love once you experience it.

I would love to see Kurt turn that into a punk rock jam. I don't know how it would go, but he would figure it out.

that's how it is with God's love once you experience it.

You spread his love to everyone, you want to pass it on.

It was then that we moved into the third decade, there was construction silence. We inhabited a space that was ours and learned how to do that. And the community was shaped by the place that was here. It wasn't really big enough the day we cut the ribbon. As they say, we build the buildings, and then the buildings build us. And that's a good metaphor, but the only problem with that metaphor is that it's too mechanical and too construction-dependent. For a Christian metaphor to truly live as metaphor, it has to weave something organic into the metaphor. Even though a church campus is built with bulldozers and hammers, it's not the mason nor the tractor at work on the hearts of a community. Christian life is more growth than production, more like a garden than a construction zone, more a tree than a tower, the patient work of gardener and soil. For the last decade, like the first, readiness has grown. The community has waited and prayed and worked and dreamed and worried some, and a hundred other things.

Musically, that era was like a blue-grass Contemplative Desperados version of:

What a wondrous time is spring,

when all the trees are budding,

the birds begin to sing,

the flowers start their blooming,

that's how it is with God's love once you experience it.

And then, in God's time, always in God's time, it was time.

This year we begin again, into a fourth decade. Nearing his death, St. Francis said to his followers, "Let us begin again, for until now we have done nothing." I believe he must have said it with a smirk on his face. He was kind of like that, but he was also giving a gift to his followers. Go beyond what we have done and what we have done yet to this point. Keep going. Don't live in the past, be present to the Spirit alive in the moment. It's the same gift Jesus once gave his amazed disciples saying, "You will do greater things than these." It's the same gift Paul invoked for the Ephesians, a prayer of boldness and confidence through faith in Christ. What are these if not blessings that empower?

We soon begin a new season on this campus. I'm glad for it. It's been a long time coming. I've been convinced all along that we are not done here. We have not brought to completion the good work that was begun here. That good work continues in and through us for one another and our children, and for those who are not here, those who will come 20 years from now. This is a blessing to give to those you may never know. To plant a tree whose shade others will sit under. This is a great gift.

This is a year when we will be asked to bless this house.

This spring our leadership team is preparing to lead us into a season of prayer and preparation in a spirituality of generosity.

In this Spring, March 31 is an earlier-than-normal Easter. April 8 is the Great Waco Solar Eclipse- I'm sure that's its official name. May 5 is Commitment Day when we'll be asked to make a pledge for 3 years of giving to the new building reconfiguring and expanding three existing buildings into one for a hospitable welcome to visitors, a secure space for babies, needed classrooms for children, a great place for youth, and a community room for breakfasts and cinnamon rolls and all kinds of ways groups big and small meet together on Sundays and just about every single day throughout the week.

It's the beginning of the next era of blessing at the church house.

Our campaign consultant asked me last fall, "What's the goal?"

I said, "We project the project will cost \$2.4 million. We don't want to finance more than \$1 million so we need to raise 1.4 million." So I said, "1.4 million, that's the goal."

He said, "That's not the goal." It's not?

No, the goal is to be a happy, healthy congregation after you've raised \$1.4 million. The money is never the goal. The building is never the goal. The faithfulness and mission of the congregation is always the goal in whatever you do, however it goes.

I can't tell you what a blessing that was for me to hear that. Music to my ears. I don't know how to raise \$1.4 million, much less 2.4 million. I can't even spell that kind of money. But I know what a faithful church looks like, I know what it sounds like, I know the music it sings, and I know what it feels like. Because I've seen it. I see it.

I don't know how to squeeze much out of my personal family budget to give significantly to the project. But I know 3 years is a long time to work with. And I know I want to be a more generous person in every way. If this helps me cultivate generosity in this way, it will help me be more generous in every way, and I want that.

I want to say a blessing. I want to give a blessing. And I want to be a blessing. And I think you want the same. I want to be in the hands of Christ, held up, blessed, and then broken open for the world God loves.

Can you hear the music? Can you hear the music of the next era? It's quiet still, but you can just begin to make out the notes, just begin to hear the voices. I can't tell yet what style it is because this is music we will make together, but I think I know the words:

*I wish for you my friend, this happiness that I have found.
You can depend on him, it matters not where you are bound.
I want the world to know, the Lord of love has come to me.
I want to pass it on.*

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