

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
The God of Salvation Is Near
Romans 10.5-6; Matthew 14.22-33
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From time to time I am asked, “What is contemplative worship mean?” That’s how DaySpring describes itself. What does it mean? Is that like liturgical? Is it traditional? Is it contemporary? Help me understand. For some people it’s kind of a curiosity question. But for others, for some people, what happens in church and what happens in worship is their life line.

Either way, it’s a reasonable question. No one loves labels and designations, but they can be helpful to have some way to translate ideas across different life experiences. Is DaySpring worship like liturgical? Yes, in a sense. Liturgy literally means “the work of the people,” and our worship and church life is definitely the work of all kinds of people. That’s been more of a challenge during the pandemic, but we’re figuring it out. Liturgy also usually means that it has some order. And that too describes our worship. After a while you recognize some familiar elements. You may even learn to love them: the chimes that ring which calls us to worship, the reading of scripture, prayers, a sermon. Until pandemic, we were starting to have communion just about every week. So, are we liturgical? Yes, sort of.

Are we like traditional? Yes, in a sense. We invoke the Christian tradition in worship. You’ll pray along with wisdom from church fathers and mothers and sing hymns, some of which are written hundreds of years ago. It’s a traditional-laden service. Most people when they think of traditional worship, think of choirs and hymns. We have both of those when we are not in raging pandemic. So, are we traditional? Yes, and no. We find meaning in the unwritten rules of traditional worship, but we’re not too uptight about breaking those rules either. That’s what Kurt used to say to us. “Learn all the rules, then break them.” I liked that.

Are we like contemporary? Yes, also in a sense. I hope we’re always as contemporary as the presence of the living Lord through the vibrancy of the Holy Spirit. Worship is not a museum of relics, but a living, breathing encounter with God through prayer, praise, and hearing God’s Word. Most people when they think of contemporary worship, think of words on a screen, a praise band, simple choruses instead of hymns. We don’t have a screen to put words on, though now we have computer screens. We don’t have a praise band, though we praise God and have had a bluegrass band from time to time. And we also sing some simple choruses that speak as much from the heart as the head. So, are we contemporary? Yes, in some ways.

What we’ve found over and over, and this is what Christians have found over and over through the generations in liturgy, in the tradition, and in every generation’s contemporary culture is that life with God is experienced in hearing and speaking God’s holy, redemptive Word in the middle of the storms of life. The contemplative life draws on liturgy, tradition, and fresh expression to help us be truly alive to ourselves, our neighbors, and to God. I’ll turn to Thomas

Merton's famous description, "Contemplation is life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness, for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent, and infinitely abundant Source . . . It is no longer I that live but Christ lives in me" (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, pp 1-5).

If you come away from worship with even a distant echo of this vision rambling around in your soul, it can change your week; it can save your life. It's not about forms or styles or instruments or order. It's about the sweet encounter with the One who saves our lives just when and in just the way we need saving. And that time comes to visit every person eventually. Like Peter drowning in the sea in the storm, we discover how close Jesus is when we cry out, "Lord, save me."

This is the heart of contemplative worship. Discovering the sheer wonder that the One who created you is with you, speaking the Word of salvation within you and through you. You are not alone. God is with you. Now.

In Romans 10, St. Paul admonishes us to remember this as grace:

Do not be discouraged and say, "Who can ascend to heaven?" To bring Christ down.
Do not be distraught and say, "Who can descend into the abyss?" To bring Christ up.

You don't have to go up into the heavens seeking him because the Messiah has already come down to you. You don't have to go down to the depths of the earth looking for him because he has already been raised from the dead. The Lord of heaven and earth is already with you.

Christ, the living Word of God, the Lord of creation, the Savior, is not way up there or way over there somewhere to be found by your efforts. The Word is already near you. This is grace. This is so important to hear at a time like this, a season of life which is not for the faint of heart. The Word of God is near you as close as your lips and as close as your heart.

Matthew's Gospel tells this remarkable story. The disciples have just experienced the emotional high of the eucharistic-like feeding of the 5000, but the next thing they know they are off in a boat on the sea in the middle of a storm, alone. They are whiplashed and storm-lashed. They've gone from the rather uncomfortable worry of the prospect of going without an evening meal, to the terror of worrying about their very lives. It's amazing how quickly the narrative of Scripture can shift from the mundane to the serious. It's amazing how quickly life can turn. One day you're lining up for the bread of life in a church service; the next day the church doors are locked and there's no bread on the store shelves for anyone.

But here comes Jesus right into the storm, Lord of bread and Lord of storm. He comes walking on water. Peter, always the voice of the church, says, if it's really you, command me to come out there. He hears, "come," and Peter does. He does. Almost immediately, he sinks. And

almost immediately, the almost is the miracle, the immediately is the reality. Almost, immediately, he begins sinking like a stone. He's drowning. He's sinking.

You know how a few minutes ago I said worship can save your life--Peter out of the boat in the water in the storm is a picture of what I'm talking about. There is going to come a time in life and maybe, likely in this storm-lashed, whiplashed season, if it has not already come, when you are going to feel like you are drowning.

The spring of our dislocation is past. The summer of our discouragement is coming to an end. The fall of our disorientation is about to begin. Schools are opening, and no one really knows what's going to happen. The weather will change, and no one really knows how it will change things. A lot of people are doing the best they can to make a plan and make contingency plans, but we're all in a little boat in the middle of a big sea. And we don't command the waves. It doesn't help that it's an election year, but I think we've always in an election year anymore and so the thunder rolls on and on.

You are going to feel at some point like you are out of the boat, drowning, sinking. But take heart. St. Paul's reminder to us of the closeness of God to us is drawn directly from a passage in Deuteronomy 30. In that passage, at that moment, Israel is perched to leave behind the wilderness wandering and cross the Jordan into a land flowing with milk and honey and danger.

For two chapters before that, 28 and 29, Moses has been warning the people of Israel with the most specific, starkest, darkest kinds of warnings you can imagine. It's painful to read. I can't imagine what it was like to hear: warnings about having your home and your family taken from you, watching someone else live in your house and eat the fruit of the trees you planted, someone taking away your children. It's just about every fear that every person has at 2 in the morning in some dark nightmare of the soul. Moses warns them: If you do not obey and follow God, these things will happen to you and your children.

And then he says, and this is the gut punch, it will happen. There will come a time, Moses says to Israel "when all these things will come upon you". "When" these things come upon you. This passage foretells great suffering. Into every life comes suffering. I suspect that in this season there will come a time when it will feel for all the world like you're drowning in a sea of anger or fear or frustration or worry or loneliness or despair--whatever waters you tend to swim in are going to be the waters you'll feel like you're drowning in.

Moses tells them: When these things happen, even then, even there, your redemption is not far off, not way up in heaven outside your grasp, not down in the depths, but near to you, as close as your lips and your heart. Of course, St. Paul draws on this promise. How could he not? He is the apostle of Jesus who embodies this promise to all whose lives are in danger. Salvation is nearer than you know. This is what we learn in worship for just such a time as this. On your lips, the sweetness of the words is there. "Jesus Christ is Lord". Would you confess that with me now: Jesus Christ is Lord. And the faith is in your heart, believing he is raised from the dead. Would you hold that faith with me in your heart now?

For Peter, bobbing there in the waters, this was not a point of curiosity—his life was at stake. Salvation was as close as the fear in his heart and the words on his lips, “Lord, save me!” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him and stilled the storm. For Peter and the others, faith was awakened just at the place where they were most afraid—just at the place where they thought they were all alone, God was near.

For some of you, perhaps for many of you, a birth or rebirth of faith is happening at this very moment—faith is being awakened or strengthened in you because God is near, and it’s none too soon. When this happens, we confess with our lips Jesus is Lord, and we believe in our hearts God raised him from the dead. And we hear with new assurance the promise of Almighty God, “you will be saved.”

There is nothing you can do to add to this. It is God himself who is calling forth this response from us. This is worship. This is life, fully alive. Our response is on our hearts and on our lips. In the sweetness of silent wonder, the God of salvation is near, right here with you now, the outstretched strong arm of God reaching to you, reaching for you to lift you up and set your feet on solid ground.

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