

Call to Worship

Creating and revealing God, we worship and adore you, for your word is come to us, your love shown to us, your life born in us this day.

**We bow with gratitude and wonder before the majesty and mystery of the babe of Bethlehem.** Help us to be sensitive and responsive to the presence of your Spirit, come in holy child to restore and make new.

**Help us to enter with humility and delight into a glorious new relationship with you established by Christ in our receptive hearts.**

Prayer of Invocation

**Lord, Open us to all that you would have us be, for you and for others.**

**'Breakthrough' into our lives and our church with new possibilities.**

**Amen.**

The Word Luke 2:22-40 Common English Bible

When the time came for their ritual cleansing, in accordance with the Law from Moses, they brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. (It's written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord.") **They offered a sacrifice in keeping with what's stated in the Law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.**

A man named Simeon was in Jerusalem. He was righteous and devout. He eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. **The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn't die before he had seen the Lord's Christ.**

Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area. Meanwhile, Jesus' parents brought the child to the temple so that they could do what was customary under the Law. **Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God.**

He said, "Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word, because my eyes have seen your salvation. You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples. It's a light for revelation to the Gentiles and a glory for your people Israel." **His father and mother were amazed by what was said about him.**

Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your innermost being too." **There was also a prophet, Anna, who belonged to the tribe of Asher.**

She was very old. She was now an 84-year-old widow. She never left the temple area but worshipped God with fasting and prayer night and day. She approached at that very moment and began to praise God and to speak about Jesus to everyone who was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. **When Mary and Joseph had completed everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to their hometown, Nazareth in Galilee. The child grew up and became strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God's favor was on him.**

Living the Word

*Four Calling Birds*

Merry Christmas! Today is the sixth day of Christmas Except for the tin of flavored popcorn I discovered still hidden away the next day and gave to my true love, we gave all of our gifts on the first day of Christmas. Even so, the song, The Twelve Days of Christmas, reminds me each year that the celebration of Jesus' birth goes on for 12 days, until January 6, which is Epiphany, when we celebrate the coming of the Wise Men.

1996 I was working as the Youth Minister at Barron United Methodist Church, while I was in process of becoming a pastor. I had been working as a lay person in this district for a number of years and the current District Superintendent at that time was Rev. Don Frank. He called me one day and asked me if I would put something together as entertainment for the District Clergy Christmas Party. So I took the 'partridge in a pear tree' song and revamped it for the United Methodist clergy of the then, Northwest District.

Somewhere I must have a copy of the words, but you don't want to hear the whole thing anyway. What I do remember was this: On the fifth day of Christmas my up-north God blessed me with 5 Christmas Eve Services, four \_\_\_\_\_, Three \_\_\_\_\_ – two thermal gloves and a turkey from Jerome Foods.

The Twelve Days of Christmas song was originally written in 1780 and used the term "Colly Birds" which is, and was then, a mysterious reference to blackbirds, perhaps ravens. The song has been rewritten many times since then and has changed the term, but it wasn't until 1909 that the term "calling birds" was referenced.

The ecumenical church, seeking a reason to sing the song in a religious setting, decided the "four calling birds" were the Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John carrying out "the Great Commission", that is, to spread the Gospel, the "good news" to all the world. In a word, they were evangelists.

Even though today is the sixth day of Christmas, I want to back us up two days to the fourth day of Christmas. Our scripture today points to four other calling birds: Moses, Simeon, Anna and the church universal. Though there is a huge time gap of thousands of years from when their calling work began and now, if we look at the strength of the call they heard and shared and how it still matters to us today, we can find great direction for our future as the church.

Beginning at Luke 2:22 - *When the time came for their ritual cleansing, in accordance with the Law from Moses, they brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. (It's written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord.") They offered a sacrifice in keeping with what's stated in the Law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.*

After the 8<sup>th</sup> day, the day that circumcision and the naming happened, Mary could be 'ritually cleansed' and ready to take Jesus to the Temple to be dedicated to the Lord; this was all to be done according to the Laws that had come out of the time of Moses, for the first born son of every family.

The sacrifice that was called for at the Temple upon the birth of a child was a lamb. Jesus was later called the 'Lamb of God' and sacrificed on the cross for all of us. But for the day of our story, Mary and Joseph could only afford to buy two turtle doves for their gift of thanksgiving at the Temple.

Mary and Joseph were faithfully following the Jewish traditions by attending to these laws. The Word of God, through Moses, was ancient to them, passed down from one generation to another, to be preserved, just as the Word of God through Moses is ancient to us, still passed down generation to generation, to be preserve.

Anyone out there a first born male in your family? Today we don't necessarily rely on the family rank or gender for spiritual leadership in our families. But just think if at least one child in each family took on the responsibility to be a spiritual mentor for the other siblings. Something to think about...Even so, we are each children of God with a responsibility to wear our faith so others can be blessed by it.

*A man named Simeon was in Jerusalem. He was righteous and devout. He eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn't die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area.*

*Meanwhile, Jesus' parents brought the child to the temple so that they could do what was customary under the Law. Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. He said, "Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word, because my eyes have seen your salvation. You prepared this salvation in the*

*presence of all peoples. It's a light for revelation to the Gentiles and a glory for your people Israel." [Jesus'] father and mother were amazed by what was said about him."*

On that day, as they prepared to present their son Jesus to God, an old man swooped in and did the dedication and blessing before they could. He knew the time in his life would come when he would witness the Messiah, and he followed those nudging to be in the right place at the right time. It was no chance meeting in the Temple, Simeon had a divine appointment to see the child.

This old man, who had long waited to see the Messiah, recognized that this was 'the One' and allowed the Holy Spirit to work within himself to share God's words in the presence of the baby's parents. His words were more important to be said than the traditional dedication blessing.

*"Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.. And a sword will pierce your innermost being, too."*

Simeon was a prophet, the words he spoke were based on the prophecies told in the Old Testament for the coming Messiah, but also in that moment the word Simeon was receiving by the power of the Holy Spirit.

When we try to look into the eyes and heart of a new baby, we try to discern if they will be a great leader, a compassionate person or a humble servant.

But not many of us want to hear from another that our baby will be 'a sign that generates opposition' or 'a sword to our hearts.' Yet that is who Jesus came to be, to show us a different way, which includes making sacrifices to live like Christ in this human world.

*"There was also a prophet, Anna. She was very old. She was now an 84-year-old widow. She never left the temple area but worshipped God with fasting and prayer night and day."* Anna also waited for the coming Messiah. She was in her mid-eighties, long a widow, she spent her days not far from the temple. She lived a relatively uneventful life and now was dedicating herself in fasting and prayers to God.

She was focused on only one outlook, God's salvation for herself and her people. Anna wasn't ease-dropping, as Simeon's words were not private just to the family before him. *Scripture says: "She approached at that very moment and began to praise God and to speak about Jesus to everyone who was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."*

Anna may have moved closer to be a part of a new baby celebration, but at Simeon's words, she knew this was not just another dedication of a first born son, but the dawning of salvation that she had been waiting for. This was 'the One' she had prayed for - fasted for, so that her people could be freed from their oppression in life. She had good news for her people – the good news that they had all been praying for and waiting for – and she shared it with all who would and could be open to its message.

*"When Mary and Joseph had completed everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to their hometown, Nazareth in Galilee.* This sentence makes it sound like they were working on the Jewish legal checklist for babies. Circumcision – check, naming – check, ritual cleansing – check, dedication – check; list done, we can head home now. We have a check list also, which includes many of the same things.

Our naming has to be completed for the legal birth certificate. They didn't have a birth certificate, or Herod possibly would have tracked them down. They did have the census, but Mary and Joseph never got to be counted as they were busy birthing a baby and entertaining shepherds and wise men.

*The child grew up and became strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God's favor was on him."*

Not a very thorough reporting of Jesus' childhood...but all that needed to be said at that point. I should have titled this sermon, as a sequel to Christmas Eve – 'Parent Blessings, on the Way to Fulfilling the Law.'

Mary and Joseph came according to the Jewish law, but return home to more than their ordinary life before Christ. They now have new confirmations to His identity and great expectations for His future (note that I didn't say happy expectations, but indeed great ones!)

Moses, Simeon, and Anna all three had a special part to play in his story – history. But what about the fourth calling bird, the church? The church began shortly after Jesus' childhood. Disciples were being formed by their faith to become the storytellers after Jesus' death and resurrection, to the rest of humanity through the ages.

Jesus did come to break the oppression, but it all came to be in God's way, not humanity's way. The Word spread and eventually converted Rome, through God's work; the Good News was spread through a radical Catholic named Luther who saw the church going in a direction away from God's way and struck a new path with the good news, which we call Protestantism.

Centuries later, a family named Wesley, were called nonconformists from the ways of the Church of England. John Wesley was converted by Luther's words of God's unconditional love, as he struggled with his faith. It was his struggle and conversion that led to the Methodist Church, much of which we follow today.

At one time in Wisconsin you could find a Methodist church in any direction within 5-7 miles. It had to be close so all could ride horses or walk to church. Now there are fewer as people are willing to travel much farther for something they believe in and care about. It isn't about the physical structure or distance any more.

James C. Howell, United Methodist Pastor, Charlotte, North Carolina wrote this, "This child provokes a crisis, a decision, for Simeon, for Anna, for all people of every generation. How we respond to this one person decides everything. The stakes are not trivial. It is not that, if we go with Jesus, our lives are 17% better, our happiness 14% higher, our marriages 16% healthier. It's all or nothing. You fall or you rise."

Usually we would hear, 'you rise or you fall', but with Christ it is 'fall and rise.' In John 12:24 Jesus says, "*I assure you that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.*" Anna fasted night and day, not day and night. Jesus came to turn things upside down from how the world understood and still understands.

It is a 'radical' which we follow as Christians, and as United Methodists. Yet our Bishop says 'We celebrate God's love lived out in our United Methodist connection that takes Christ everywhere, from our neighborhoods, into all corners of the world.' The church is surely a calling bird to us and invites us to be a calling bird for others.