



Christ United Methodist Church

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Date: December 27, 2020

Sermon: Jesus Is Presented at the Temple

Text: Luke 2:22-40

Speaker: Pastor Cheryl Arnold

Today Before reading today's gospel text, I'm going to read most of the words to Wesley's Covenant Prayer.

Why? Well, several reasons. For one, it's the right time of year. Many Methodist congregations use the prayer on one of the first two Sundays in the new year, or on the last Sunday of the current year—which is today, so as Beth told you earlier, we're going to pray this near the end of today's service.

For another, if you've been part of UM Pastor Adam Hamilton's studies this Advent or in the past, you know that he prays this every morning—and during the pandemic, our West Ohio Bishop and Conference staff have invited all of us to pray it daily.

So hear these words, as found in our UM hymnal #607, where it is more appropriately titled "A Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition."

I am no longer my own, but thine.
 Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.
 Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
 Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,
 exalted for thee or brought low by thee.
 Let me be full, let me be empty.
 Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

It's an amazing prayer—and a difficult one to pray...at least it is for me. I mean, I'm okay with lines like "let me be full"...not so good with lines like "let me be empty." Often I wonder, how can anyone pray this?

And then I remember that Simeon, Anna, Mary and Joseph—ARE this prayer, they are actually living out these words.

And so are we.

Today's gospel story only appears here, in Luke, chapter 2, verses 21-40. I'll be reading from the NRSV

Wesley's Covenant Prayer is Simeon and Anna, who were no longer their own, but God's.

Simeon was a righteous and devout man, meaning he obeyed the commandments and lived a God-focused life. We're told that the Holy Spirit rests upon him, which can be biblical code for a prophet. The Spirit revealed to Simeon that he wouldn't die until he saw the Lord's Messiah, the Christ.

The Spirit leads Simeon into the Temple, where he happens to bump into the Holy Family—in an area that Jewish sources estimate may have been as large as 6 football fields! Taking the babe Jesus in his arms, Simeon praises God and sings: "For my eyes have seen your salvation...a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." So Simeon both finds the family and voices salvation for the Gentiles—for non-Jews—clearly, this was the work of the Holy Spirit.

Anna is actually called a prophet, someone with a reputation for speaking God's truth. And we'd better pay attention to her, because while male prophets appear frequently, Anna is one of only 6 named female prophets in our Bible, the only named one in our New Testament.

Depending on your translation, Anna is either 84 years-old, or she's been widowed 84 years. If it's the latter, we can tack on at least another 20 years to her age when we add in her 7-year marriage and at another 13-14 years of childhood. Either way, no wonder she doesn't hoist up baby Jesus like Simeon does.

Anna has probably outlived all her close relatives. If her husband had brothers, she'd have been expected to marry one of them next—so either he didn't, or she resisted. She's been living in the Temple, likely since being widowed. Anna's been fasting and praying, day and night, continually worshipping God—so she's already there when Mary, Joseph and Jesus show up. Upon seeing Jesus, she begins praising God and sharing the Good News with all who needed to hear it.

Wesley's Covenant Prayer is Mary and Joseph, who will be exalted for God, or brought low for God.

While it's tempting to think that Jesus' earthly parents would be honored for their special role, the truth is they both paid a price for Mary's unplanned pregnancy. We can read Joseph's story in the first chapter of Matthew's gospel, and Mary's story in Luke's first chapter.

Mary and Joseph were engaged, but not married. When Mary became pregnant by the Holy Spirit, she would have been subject to all the social shaming teenage mothers still experience—shaming that the fathers usually escape. This was worse, though, because, by Jewish law, unwed mothers could be stoned to death.

And yet, knowing that, after the angel told Mary that God had chosen her to be Jesus' mother, Mary replied, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Because Joseph stayed with Mary, instead of calling the whole thing off, people would have believed that the child was his. I don't imagine these two received a lot of compassion from their rabbi—or others in their community. Still, these parents kept the Law of Moses, the Law of the Lord, and the relevant parts for today's text are found in Leviticus 12.

The law required all baby boys to be circumcised and named 8 days after birth. And because giving birth made the mother ritually unclean, new moms were required to undergo a purification ceremony 40 days after having a boy, and 80 days after having a girl.

In Jesus' time, this ceremony took place at the temple, where the mother presented an offering to the priest. The usual offering included a lamb...but if the mother was poor, she could instead offer two pigeons or two turtle doves—which was the sacrifice brought by Mary and Joseph. As NT scholar Shively Smith says "In Luke's gospel, when Jesus is talking about the poor, he's talking about himself."

Recall that Simeon specifically cautioned Mary—her son won't have it easy. "The child will cause the falling and rising of many in Israel...and a sword will pierce your own soul, too." I wonder if Mary pondered those troubling words throughout Jesus' life, or if she put them out of her mind until they came rushing back to her at Jesus' crucifixion.

Wesley's Covenant Prayer will be Jesus, as he is put to doing and put to suffering. But at 40 days old we don't see it yet. As we follow his life and ministry, though, it's clear that Jesus was willing to give his entire self to God, even if the cost is crucifixion.

Wesley's Covenant Prayer is you, and it is me, as we become the people God created us to be.

We live into the prayer whenever we trust in God's strength and power instead of our own, whenever we love others as we love ourselves. We live into the prayer whenever we ask for forgiveness of our sins, or renew our baptisms, or share a meal at the Lord's Table.

The prayer itself is impossibly difficult...but with God's help, we can live into it little by little, one line at a time.

Incidentally, John Wesley would likely be embarrassed by our common reference to "Wesley's Covenant Prayer" because even though he wrote everything from pamphlets to scholarly volumes, he didn't write this.

Historian Richard Heitzenrater tells the story this way:

On Monday, August 11th, 1755, John Wesley was leading a Covenant Renewal Service, reciting parts of a text written by Richard Alleine, a British clergyman. Wesley spoke these words: "I will be no longer mine own, but give up myself to thy will in all things" –and 1800 Methodists stood up in agreement.

Then Wesley declared, "Such a night I scarce ever saw before. Surely the fruit of it shall remain forever."

I don't know about forever, but here we are some 265 years later, and I don't foresee an end to people praying this anytime soon.

And now, after a short pastoral prayer I hope you'll join me in praying Wesley's Covenant Prayer in place of the Lord's Prayer. I'll be using the contemporary version linked to our website, but feel free to use whichever version you prefer.

God of the past and present and the year to come, we thank you for this day and for getting us through this very difficult year. Thank you for the chance to worship, even if still virtually. Thank you for the people who have sacrificed so much to bring an end to this pandemic.

Bless the families who are grieving lives, health, and jobs lost to COVID both directly and indirectly. Thank you for the scientists who have developed vaccines, and for those who have selflessly tested them. Grant us strength to stay the course, and let us use lessons we've learned during this time to improve the lives of all your children.

Strengthen and renew our faith, so that our lives might be a witness to others who need to know your love and mercy.

And now, grant us the grace to live into the prayer given to us by your servant John Wesley, as we pray together these words:

I am no longer my own, but yours.

Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you, praised for you or criticized for you.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and fully surrender all things to your glory and service.

And now, O wonderful and holy God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, you are mine and I am yours.

So be it.

And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it also be made in heaven. Amen.

And now as we prepare to leave this place and leave this year, let us be open to the ways God is leading us, so that like Anna and Simeon, Mary and Joseph, and all the saints who've gone before us, we too can be no longer our own, but God's.