

Calvary United Methodist Church
January 6, 2019

COVENANT SERVICE
Rev. Dr. A. Robert Cook

Children's Message:

Luke 2:21-40

I'd like the kids to come forward. How are you today? Well, that's good. Hi, girls! Okay. I have a captive audience.

What's the hardest thing that you have to wait for? Think about this. Are you a patient girl? Pretty patient? Is your sister patient? Oh, that's good. Are you a pretty patient person? Sometimes? So what's the hardest thing to wait for? Dessert? Dinner? The school bus? Dismissal? Christmas? Christmas, yeah, that can be. I'm one of seven kids. We had one bathroom. I'll tell you what was hard.

Could you imagine being like in your 80s and God had made a promise when you were a kid that you would see the salvation of Israel and you didn't know what that quite meant, but you kept waiting and waiting and waiting and now you are in your 80s, maybe even older and there is a story in the Bible about that, which we will read a little later.

A man named Simeon and God had spoken to him that he would see the one who was going to save Israel and all its people. And he would go to the temple and he would wait and he would wait and he would wait. Days and months and weeks and years and decades went by. And he just waiting. He was very patient. And then one day he's there by the temple and he is going to go in but he sees a couple, a young couple coming in and the woman is holding a baby. Can you guess that baby's name? (Jesus.) You got it. You go to the head of the class. Baby Jesus. They took him, it was the custom to go and take the baby and present him to the Lord on the 8th day. So he is 8 days old. That's a pretty small baby, right? And when Simeon sees this couple, he says, "Now, that's a long time to wait." And then he does the most amazing thing. He goes up to this couple. They have no idea. "Can I see the baby?" And then he holds the baby. And then he does the most amazing thing. He breaks into song. Would you break into song if you had waiting for something for a long, long time? That's what Christian people do. When God does something really good, we just break into song. Really. When Pastor Jeff gets off the plane in Africa, he is going to sing that Hallelujah Chorus because it's a long flight. He breaks into song all the time. You always hear...he's always breaking into song. And that's a good thing.

So Mary and Joseph must have been really surprised, but maybe they did too. And then he did a little dance, I bet, with this little baby. The first time you saw your brother did you break into song? And do a little dance? You were excited though, weren't you? Yeah. You know, it's kind of nice. It is. And sometimes I'll wake my wife up in the morning and she doesn't always appreciate it when I break into song, depending on the time. But when you do that,

there's just something fun about it that your waiting is over and there is this great sense of joy.

Well, let's pray. Thank you, Lord, that when we wait for a long, long time and then you answer our prayers, it's the best thing in the world to break into song and you'll be listening, I know. And you might even join us in our song. Bless our kids. They are patient and we love them. Amen.

Message:

So, would you join me in prayer? Lord, help us to hear from you today and speak to our hearts. I pray your grace would guide us and that the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts may be acceptable in your sight, oh, Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Up high in the mountains is a beautiful rushing stream. It was fed by crystal clear springs that were pure and fresh, deep in the mountain, the oldest creation itself. And children played games by this beautiful stream. Swans and geese nested and swam in its waters. Its water was so clear you could see down to the bottom where the rocks were and you could see the trout rise to come to the surface to catch a fly. And high up in the mountain in a little vale hidden away there was an old man who served as the keeper of the springs. He had been hired so long ago no one could remember a time when he wasn't the keeper of the springs. He traveled on foot, usually alone. Very few people ever observed him. He'd go from one spring to the other clearing the leaves and twigs, the fallen branches and debris from the springs, anything that might stop the flow and pollute the spring.

And time went on. At a town council meeting they had forgotten about the keeper of the springs and someone looked at the books and questioned why they were paying this keeper of the springs when the stream was so beautiful it didn't really need this and no one had supervised him anyway and they had taxes to collect and they had roads to pave and services to provide and keeping costs down is always an issue. And so giving money to some stream keeper seemed to be an unnecessary expense and the old man was told by letter that his service was no longer needed.

High up in the mountain the springs now went untended. And twigs and leaves and branches began to block the flow. Mud and silt began to clog the stream bed. Farm waste would pollute the waters that were no longer running so clear and fresh. And the water turned brackish. The fresh mountain scent that the spring and the streams had provided no longer smelled so good anymore. It smelled more like a stagnant bog. The swans and the geese flew away. The trout also went away. Children were told to stay away from the stream. People began to fall ill.

The life of the village depended on the stream and the stream depended on the keeper. So the people gathered. The town council was convened. The experts had gone out and studied the

situation and they made their report. And they said that the springs need to be kept up. So money was found and the old man, the keeper of the spring, was once again hired. And in time, the springs were cleaned up and the stream ran pure as crystal again. The trout and the swans and the geese returned. The children played by its banks once more. Illness was replaced by health. The fresh scent of the mountains that had delighted the people was a delight once again. The life of the village depended upon the health of the stream.

The stream is your soul. And you are the keeper. The most important thing in your life is not what you do. If you haven't gotten this yet, pay attention. You are not a human doing. You and I are passing through this life. We have a departure date and no one can take anything material with them on that day. Your good, your title, your position in the community or your field, you leave all of that behind. The most important thing in your life is not what you have or what you do. It's who you are and who you are becoming. But that is what you will take with you into eternity.

We believe that the soul is a creation of God and we bear the mark of our maker, we are made by God, we are made for God, we are made to need God, which means we are not sufficient in ourselves, try as we might and there are many who do try and we do too in many ways. And we cannot quantify or measure the soul. I know that one person tried to measure the soul by agreeing with people who were nearly gone if they could weigh them and they found that it was just a few ounces which is probably the breath in their lungs. We don't have an anatomical position for the soul, but it's there, this mysterious force in our being. It hungers, it thirsts, it experiences deep joy, deep sorrow. It can be content, it can be in pain. The soul can be well, the soul can be sick. It could be rich, it could be poor. It is that part of us that we sense as eternal even though we cannot really fathom what eternity is.

Now, if we are paying attention to what is the most important thing in life, we will know how important it is to develop an interior life that is alive and that is rich. In fact, as a church one of the measures of our aliveness is found in our ability to help people discover, nurture, develop their interior life. And many of you have seen that guy who did this trick with sticks and plates or balls, remember that? Well, let me show you a video, running around in a frenzy seeing plates and spinning them on tricks and watching it keep going, so let me go ahead and run the video.

(VIDEO)

It's a fun video, isn't it? It really is. Neat trick, he put on quite a show. How many of you take your good china and stick it on sticks? How about you, Charlotte, do you take the really nice china you got from your grandmother and spin it around? Nobody does that. You would holler if someone did that, even to your correlative. What are you doing? A church that does not develop its interior life and the interior life of its member ends up just trying to put on shows and entertain people with neat tricks. We are not called to do that. I mean it is a neat trick, it's a cute video, but nobody does that. Some pastors, and I've done that too, but

you know people don't want neat tricks in church. They want substance.

The Christian life is not easy. It requires discipline. There are no tricks, there are no shortcuts to the work of spiritual formation. And the Bible will often upset you. It will mess with your cherished beliefs because sometimes Jesus does not support your politics or mine, no matter what side or affiliation you are on. He will get hold of the things that you think you have rock solid and he'll play with them because he is developing us into people made in the image of Christ. So the Bible becomes one of the most important ways for us to nourish the interior life because it has the power to feed the soul.

The reading that Joe read from Jeremiah 31 actually helps us orient our soul toward God. He understood the covenant made at Sinai, the 10 commandments that God had written on tablets of stone, right. This is broken time and time and time again and they couldn't do it. And what happened was it became hostile toward it, that they found clever ways to get around it but what they were doing was it wasn't a matter of obedience, it was a matter of nurturing their own soul. And Jeremiah looked forward to the day when God's covenant would not be written on tablets of stone but on our hearts and then the covenant would be our identity and we would be connected with God in a brand new way because it is coded in our soul. And this is what Jesus came to do, which is why we call it a new birth or this new covenant because it is written in our heart.

Now, in this New Year, your first task and mine as well is to be the keeper of our individual stream, clearing away the debris, the things that don't matter, the things that keep the stream of our soul from running clear. You cannot do that without being in dialog with the one who made your soul. And you can do it better by being in dialog with people of like precious faith. We have this book that guides our dialog with God because the Bible is a primary means for nurturing the soul and the interior life. And a primary task for a congregation is to be together in a larger dialog with the Bible and one another. We have many and serious issues before us and in just about six weeks the United Methodist Church will meet for a special General Conference and they have been in dialog for this for a long time and there is no agreement so we don't know how it is going to come out except that we need to pray. And the Bible will guide them as it guides us in our worship, it guides us in both private and corporate worship because sometimes just like Simeon you gotta break into song, because God is there. And it will guide us with the priorities of being a faithful Christian community that reflects the Gospel and it will guide us in our service and our witness that Christ is alive in us.

The life of the village depended upon the health of the stream. The stream is your soul and you, you are the keeper. Amen.