

- Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, or who shall stand in His holy place? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul onto vanity nor sworn deceitfully, he shall receive the blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of our salvation. O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, serve him with gladness, all the earth. Amen. (tranquil organ music) (congregation singing praises)

- Let us now unite our hearts and our voices in our unison prayer of confession. Let us pray. Oh, Lord, Thou has searched us and known us. Thou understandest our thoughts afar off, and art acquainted with all our ways. There is not a word in our tongues, but low, oh Lord, Thou knowest it altogether. Take from us all hardness and impenitence, that we, admitting our sins and earnestly facing our faults before thee, may obtain pardon for all our guilt, absolved, O God, from every kind of sin. Forgive us for trying to be clever when we should have sought wisdom. Heal lost from the disease of trying to make names for ourselves when we should have been seeking to glorify thy name. Enable us, O Lord, to find pardon now, and to attain everlasting redemption in the world to come. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen. As in our prayer, we asked God to pardon us through Jesus Christ our Lord. We are made aware during the Christmas season that indeed our redemption is through Christ who saves us from our sins. It is recorded that the angel, in announcing the birth of Jesus, said that his name should be called Jesus, for he would save his people from their sin. May this be our understanding and our experience at this season of the year. (tranquil organ music) (soprano singing)

- One of the reasons why Christians come together for a corporate worship is to hear the reading of the word of God. Today, our scripture lesson contains a portion from the Old Testament and a portion from the New. In the Old Testament, Zachariah chapter two, beginning at the 10th verse is our reading. "Sing and rejoice O daughter of Zion, for lo I come and I will dwell in the midst of you," says the Lord, "and many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day and shall be my people, and I will dwell in the midst of you, and you shall know that the Lord of Hosts has sent me to you, and the Lord will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem. Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling." The New Testament reading is from the Gospel according to Luke, chapter two, beginning with verse 21. "And at the end of eight days, when Jesus was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. And when the time came for their purification, according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, as it is written in the law of the Lord, quote, 'Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord' unquote, and to offer a sacrifice, according to what is said in the law of the Lord, 'quote, a pair of turtle doves, or two young pigeons,' unquote. Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, looking for the constellation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And inspired by the spirit, he came into the temple. And when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him according to the custom of the law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God, and said, 'Lord, now let us thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy

salvation which thou has prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people, Israel,' and his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them." Amen. (tranquil organ music) (congregation singing praises) The Lord be with you.

- And also with you.

- Let us pray. Almighty God, we acknowledge here in thy sanctuary that although we have not been good to thee, thou hast been good to us. We frequently have deserved adversity, but instead the lines have fallen unto us in pleasant places. Thou has crowned us with loving kindness, and hast anointed us with the oil of gladness. For these unmerited mercies, we give thee thanks. O God, we are grateful to thee this morning that we do find it in our hearts to seek thee and to worship thee. Thou hast given us the grace by which an interest in thy kingdom has been kindled in our souls. We know not how to be sufficiently grateful that before we love thee, thou did love us, and did send thy son, Jesus Christ, to be our redeemer and our friend. We thank thee for the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst. Grant that we may heed his voice and honor the calls which he makes upon us. O God, as we come thoughtfully into thy sanctuary, we become conscious of many needs which we have and we bring them to thee in prayer. We come as needy children to a loving and all sufficient father. More than anything else, we need the convincing awareness of thy presence in our lives, to know and to feel that thou art not dead, that thou art not distant, but that thou art a present force in our lives. Help us therefore to live close to thee and to experience, even in this hour, the redeeming grace which only thou canst give us. We lift up to thee our petitions for health and for serenity. We ask that these blessings may especially be given to those who today are sick. We pray for those who are the victims of the flu epidemic in our nation and in the world. Grant unto them peace and patience and hope, and remind all those who are sick of thy loving care through the nurses and the doctors and the friends who visit them. We offer our prayers, O God, for all who need to make great choices in their lives. Give them not only wisdom in general, but wisdom that is tailored to their own needs and their own particular situations. Grant that those who ponder their life's vocation may receive the clarity of insight and the steadfastness of purpose which is essential for the making of stable choices. May Christian motives be uppermost in the minds of those who plan for leadership in tomorrow's business world. May they have every Christian grace as they move into business responsibilities and professional demands. We offer also our prayer for those who plan to be church leaders, theologians, professors, ministers, bishops. Guide them by thy spirit so that they may guide others to the way of Christ. Keep them from emphasizing trivialities and ignoring the spirit of Christ. Help them to know that in Christ there is no east or west, in him, no south or north. Help thy church to be in fact, one great fellowship of love. Take away from us every attitude which would hinder the accomplishment of this. Indeed, oh God, we pray that thou would give us hearts prepared to love one another, and prepared to love ourselves properly. Grant us grace to do ourselves the supreme favor of offering our hearts to thee, so now in this moment we pause to do this. Oh God, take our hearts and make them thine. Receive us as thy children, for we make our prayer in the name of him who has taught us, when we pray, to say together, "Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

- Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

- This is the 12th day of Christmas, if I count correctly, and I hope I do. This day, if it reminds most of us of anything, probably recalls 12 lords a-leaping, or a partridge in a pear tree. It's the last Sunday of the old Christmas season, and the first Sunday of the new year. Some of us had scarcely begun to get used to the 1960s, and now we're almost out of them. And the coming of the new is even faster than the passage of time. This is the year of Apollo 8, and man's first voyage outside the Earth's gravitational field. But that was last year, wasn't it? Who knows what this year or the next year will bring. Surely we seem to be getting a long way from the world that is represented by the quaint little song about a partridge in a pear tree. For many people, we seem also to be getting farther and farther from a world, or a time in which the season through which we have just passed has any real or specific meaning, or significance. And so, we often hear it asked, can we put Christ back into Christmas? The question, as it is often asked in this day in time, seems a little trite and irrelevant to me in a world like ours. How hollow the solemn denunciations of commercialism sound in a day in which man lives by all kinds of commerce, and in many ways lives better than he has ever lived before. I wouldn't walk across the street to hear all of the sermons that have been preached this Christmas season deploring the commercialism of modern Christmas. In fact, I would walk across the street to avoid hearing them, and I think that in doing so, I would have struck a modest blow against the kind of vacuous piety which in our time so often masquerades as Christianity. The really important question is whether our world any longer is or can be receptive to the message of Christmas, that is, to the message of the coming of God in Jesus Christ. Can it make any sense out of that message at all? Now, I suppose we could create a kind of small sensation here by simply saying that it cannot, but I would be less than honest with you if I didn't confess at the outset that I'm not going to say that this morning, but neither am I going to be presumptuous enough to stand here and announce from this pulpit to the world and to the last third of the 20th century that yes, Christ can and does have importance and meaning for all of us. I just want to call your attention to the fact that the world has not always, or even often been entirely receptive to Christ, and that in this respect our age may not differ so greatly from many others. All the pious glorifying of the birth of Jesus that has traditionally gone on at Christmas, understandably, has nevertheless made us Christians forget the essentially obscure and humble character of the birth of Jesus, and indeed of the origin of Christianity. Who would've thought that from so small a beginning such a mighty movement would have sprung, and yet, already before the close of the first century, Luke foresaw the world historical importance of the faith in Jesus which he held. At a time when it was far from obvious that Christianity would conquer the Western world, Luke wrote a two volume history of Jesus and the beginnings of the Christian Church. He wrote it out of his fundamental conviction that Jesus Christ was the center, the very hub of human destiny and history. Christians have since read the books he wrote and taken for granted his basic conviction. And yet, it is perhaps significant for us to remember this morning that in Luke's day, relatively few people would have taken him seriously, much less agreed with him. Now the text, which is our lectionary reading appointed for this 12th day of Christmas, this text is from the Gospel of Luke and reflects Luke's firm belief. It is the passage from the second chapter, which, as you've just heard, is a description of the events immediately following Jesus' birth, concluding with the famous (indistinct). Our text is quite appropriate for this last day of the Christmas season, for it is the final in a series of infancy narratives with which Luke's Gospel begins. It is based on the previous accounts, the stories of angels and shepherds in Jesus' birth, but

it points forward to the manifestation of Jesus to Israel and to the world. We therefore, so to speak in the text, stand at the end of the Christmas season, and already there is a hint that more rigorous times lie ahead. So, when Mary and Joseph marvel at Simeon's wonderful words, the ancient Sage continues, "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against, and a sword will pierce through your own soul also that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed." And thus, before the wondrous words about Jesus being a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel, are fulfilled, Jesus will be a scandal, a divisive, and perhaps judgmental force. Still Luke's emphasis does not fall upon this hard fact. The subsequent pericope of the next story in the account, the brief tale about the old prophetess Anna who gives thanks to God at that very hour, indicates that Luke wants to emphasize the positive side of Simeon's prophecy. Luke's last Christmas story then presents Jesus as the light of the world. And yet, this Jesus is one born of human parentage, there is but brief mention of the virgin birth. He is born in humble circumstances. He is circumcised on the eighth day, like any other good son of Israel. He is given a good historic Israelite name. Indeed, the purification offering of two turtle doves, or two pigeons is the one specified for the mother who cannot afford a lamb offering. Even the presentation of Jesus to the Lord in the temple, which is something extraordinary, is recounted as the fulfillment of Israelite law. Jesus is a true and obedient son of the covenant, and Luke wishes to make this fact absolutely clear. And so, the righteous and elderly Simeon who takes the baby Jesus into his arms and blesses him is the very personification of that righteous remnant of Israel from whom the Christ or Messiah would come. Simeon has been waiting a long time for the relief, for the constellation of a troubled and oppressed Israel. And in this time, he has been sustained only by the Spirit inspired knowledge that he would not die until he saw the Lord's salvation, until he saw the Christ, the anointed king of Israel. And when he sees Jesus and recognizes him as the Christ, then he knows that his time has come. "Lord, now let thy servant depart in peace according to thy word. For my eyes have seen thy salvation which thou has prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for the glory of thy people Israel. Jesus is designated as the one through whom God will make you saving purpose for the world know, and thus the salient note of Luke's theology is struck. Through Christ, God's light shines forth as a beacon to Gentiles, to nations and peoples. Through a true son of Israel, Israel's true role is fulfilled and she attains her glory. The imagery comes from the Old Testament, particularly from 2 Isaiah. All of this is very beautiful, I think. And yet, in the aftermath of 2,000 years of traditional biblical and Christian language, how does it sound to us today? Perhaps a little trite, or perhaps we take it for granted, or perhaps we wonder just a bit about it. There was a time when, I suppose, it seemed equally inspiring and true to just about everybody or everyone in the Western world, in Christendom, but perhaps today it seems a little more inspiring than true. It's very likely that the time is gone when one could simply take for granted that the acceptance of Simeon's prophecy as obvious revealed truth. Perhaps that time was gone before the Apollo 8, years before. The recent celebration of the death of God was perhaps only the widespread recognition that the Lordship of God and his Christ over our lives and histories is now no longer an obvious fact which everyone takes for granted and no one dares doubt. It was, I think, a kind of popular waking up to a situation that had existed for a good while, a kind of uneasiness about the relevance and meaningfulness and truth of our religious tradition. But wait a minute. We look around us, especially in this region, and we still see manifold signs of the vitality of the Christian religion. And so, it may seem superfluous or even wrong headed to speak of obstacles in the way of belief in our age. After all, the Apollo 8 astronauts, as they circled around the Moon, read the scriptures and prayed to the God that the Judeo-Christian tradition. Is our time really comparable

with Luke's? Well, while the church is very much alive, and I for one am not sorry, at least not most of the time, we ought not to deceive ourselves by looking only at the nearby signs of optimism. For it is not only in the communist world that Christianity is on the defensive. In Europe and in much of this country, the social pressures which used to get people to church on Sunday morning have weakened. In fact, on the religious news just this morning, I heard that for now 10 years, year by year, the percentage of Americans who can be found in church on any given Sunday morning has been declining. It's down to 43% now among Americans, and that figure is only that high because of the rather remarkably high incidents of church attendance among Roman Catholics. Less than 30% of the population of the world is even nominally Christian today, and that's less than 30 years ago. There are predictions that the percentage will shrink to say 15% by the year 2,000. And even the Roman Catholic church, which to us Protestants has so long seemed to be such an unshakeable monolith, has been shuttering in the wake of widespread rebellion among the laity, and defections from the clergy. And so, it is not alarmist to say that the fortress of Christendom is not only on the defensive, but has some real problems within the ranks. Such signs as these are cause for concern, but perhaps they need not be reason for despair, for the Gospel which Luke announces in this text for the 12th day of Christmas transcends all human expectations and institutions, even the visible church. Luke may have been encouraged because he saw the early Christian mission succeeding, but his own proclamation of the Gospel was not based simply upon that success. He like the other members of the New Testament church was moved by the conviction, the faith and the hope that God was really bringing a new thing into being. He saw the advent of this newness in what to world could only seem a rather unimportant event, the birth of a baby in humble circumstances. That faith which Luke shared with other first century Christians was perhaps the principle miracle of Christian origins. It was a conviction that despite many confusing and contrary indications, God was working his will among men, leading humanity into a new day. Such a faith was really far more amazing than belief in angels descending from heaven, or even the virgin birth. How easy it has been for a culture permeated by Christian influence over one or 2,000 years to take Simeon's prophecy and Luke's faith for granted, but how really astounding that Luke should dare to announce the fulfillment of ancient hopes and universal yearnings in the birth of a baby in lowly surroundings, in one who was to be crucified as a messianic pretender. Luke knows that this new day is not yet fully manifest, that its consummation lies ahead in the future. He knows that the ambiguities and frustrations of human life and human history are going to continue, that rigorous times, times of hardship and crisis are not over and done with. Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed. And yet he also believes that God has already spoken a decisive word over the course of human history, and that that history and destiny is moving to a conclusion that God intends. Now, it may be a question to us, to some of us, to many of our contemporaries, whether such talk is any longer meaningful. As we take leave of the Christmas season, can we take the message of Christmas with us and make it meaningful in our lives and in our world? That is a real question, and I do not want to take the edge off of it or deprive it of its seriousness by giving some pat or superficial answer. To such an answer one could well respond, "Of course he said that. He was expected to say it. He even gets paid for saying it." I just want to suggest again that faith in the real message of Christmas has always been a challenge, and has always been a risk. The problems and challenges which faith confronts today are real and serious, new and different, but not without precedent. Luke's faith may commend itself to us now, today, even as it did to men of the first century of our era. In a world of ever increasing change and motion, we yearn for direction, and for the assurance that there is one who illumines and who guides. In a

threatening world, we yearn for a security that is more satisfying than the many tentative securities the modern world now offers, for we know that the science and the technology which produces the securities which are quite beneficent, on the other hand can be the instrument of the captivity and even the annihilation of mankind. In a world ridden by dissension, plagued by inequities, tortured by the senseless sufferings of millions, we yearn for peace and justice, and sensibility in it all. Luke does not announce the immediate fulfillment of all these yearnings if we only believe. The new Testament does not assure us of peace, happiness, and security in the sense that these things are usually defined. What we are given his perspective and power, perspective with which to view ourselves and others with charity and with hope, power to engage in the tasks which are set immediately before us, power and perspective to understand and to accept our destinies as God's grace, most of all when these are not pleasant. So on the 12th day of Christmas, we necessarily turn from the celebration of the appearance of God's grace and love in the world, and set our hands to the tasks of a new year. Does this year or the prospect of it appear to us as a confusion, and even the curse, or does it appear to us as an open future, God's future, the object of God's blessing? Upon our answer to such a question hinges the meaningfulness of this and every Christmas season, and I would not presume to answer that question for you, but may I simply wish a happy and a meaningful 12th day of Christmas. Amen. (tranquil organ music) (congregation singing praises) (tranquil organ music) (tranquil organ music) (soprano singing) (tranquil organ music) (congregation singing praises)

- All that we have, we have of thee, creator and preserver of mankind. Accept these gifts which we now bring before thee and help us to make the whole of life an offering, and every thought a prayer. We would seal this, our worship this morning, in a renewed consecration of ourselves in our coming days to thy service through Jesus Christ our Lord. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with us all. Amen. (church bells tolling) (church bells tolling) (church bells tolling)