

The 4th Sunday after Epiphany-The Presentation

Malachi. 3. Luke 2:22ff

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, + and the Holy Ghost. Amen. +

Several years ago, a Franciscan friar priest and friend said he was speaking to the children in the parochial school attached to his parish about the various seasons of the Church Calendar. He was describing Epiphany, the time when Jesus is revealed for who he really is, and then...he asked the class if anyone knew what was special about February 2nd? Hands went up all over the room and little girl blurted out loudly, “It’s Groundhog Day; just like the movie!” It is likely a safe bet to say that 99 out of 100 people, if asked, would provide the exact same answer and have no idea that it is the Presentation of our Lord in the temple.

Now, just in case you have not seen the movie, Groundhog Day, you should know that it is the story of Phil Conner, an ambitious, obnoxious, and self-centered news reporter/weatherman who is assigned to go to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania and cover the furry little whistle pig coming out of his lair in order to announce there will be 6 more weeks of winter. Mr. Conner is disgusted and feels demeaned having to even go to such a backwater village, let alone waste his time and pretend he is reporting real news. BUT, something bizarre happens in the midst of his cynicism toward his fellows; each morning when his alarm radio hits 6:00 AM he awakens to find himself re-living the same day over and over and over again. Every day the events which occur are precisely identical to the day before, including all encounters: **with one exception**; he alone changes and as he faces the realities around him he begins to be transformed—converted. His sight alters from seeing the people around himself as dull, and as objects to meet his desires, to engaging them with all their deficits and limitations, as opportunities to give and receive compassion, care, love, and grace. He becomes sacrificial in his offerings. His world, which has been one of drudgery and loneliness, becomes a place of light and hopefulness.

Now, why talk about Groundhog Day if this is the Presentation of our Lord? Because there is an irony in the common themes that place themselves in our path today: they are both about shadow and light; about occluded sight and clarifying vision. The story of Jesus being presented in the Temple as told by Luke carries all the tensions we experience on a daily basis, and Luke beckons us to see that in Jesus those same struggles have been met and known.

So we find ourselves hearing from an old man. This is a man who has hoped and longed for redemption—that is, for a life that is defined not by sin and darkness, but by hope found in the presence of God. And he gives voice to this in what is nearly poetry. “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace for word has become embodied—(My paraphrase). In other words, “I am ready to die now for the hope of my people has arrived; I do not have to wait or wonder about it any longer, because I see that hope present in a person”. St. Augustine wrote of this in a homily; “The ancient Simeon bore in his arms the new-born Christ, and all the while Christ ruled and upheld the old man. Now that the Messiah had been born, all the old man’s wishes on earth had been fulfilled...The Prophets have sung that the Maker of heaven and earth would converse on earth with men. An Angel has declared that the Creator of flesh and spirit would come in the flesh. The unborn John, while still in the womb, has saluted the unborn Saviour. The old man Simeon has seen God as little child.” Imagine for a few moments the picture Luke is drawing. Joseph and

Mary are doing what the Law of Moses demands. First, she is being purified 40 days after giving birth, and second, Jesus, as the oldest male is being offered to God. It was a ritual that occurred every day, day in and day out, and was as ordinary as our walking into this place to pray or sing or greet. And suddenly this old codger appears and takes the child and sings out his heart in hope. Where have you sung such a song in life? Ancient tradition suggests he was blind although our text makes no mention of it. If he was it would be even more ironic for he proclaims, “My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people.”

But then, after his rejoicing he tells Mary her heart will be pierced because her child will bring about the rising and falling of many, because their (and our) response to him will reveal what we hold deep in our hearts. (It is no accident this day is half-way between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday.). This is a complex text with many layers but today let us at least consider the shadows that haunt us and the light God gives that may put those hauntings in a proper place.

Most of us live a world where we believe in and deal with what we can see, feel, manipulate, and measure. While it seems real it is illusory, because it is not full. Sometimes that world is exciting and on other occasions it is a cause for concern and perhaps fear. (Look at the reaction to the corona virus). We all know what it means to live under shadows—unmet dreams and wishes, guilt that we cannot toss off, pathological desire for certainty to name a few). Sometimes we get to those places through our own actions and choices and at others it is due to activities outside our immediate control. WE know what it means to spend sleepless nights worrying about situations we cannot script. We all carry within us memories of mistakes we wish we had not made or missed opportunities to make life better for others that we passed by out of blindness. I suspect that most people here today have specks of guilt and remorse that deep down continue to accuse and leave us to believe that forgiveness is really for people other than us. And on occasion there is simply sorrow or grief that extracts the life energy out of us so that one day looks depressingly like every other day. This is what it means to live waiting and longing for something new; waiting for what we of a religious bent, call redemption.

But now, let me suggest something to you which may seem counter-intuitive or maybe even contradictory. It is exactly where and when we know our discomfort, our loss of hope, and our pain that we may in fact be closest to seeing clearly, like Simeon. You know what happens when after hours in the dark someone suddenly switches on a light and it pours into your retina like a fire!! It is painful—nearly blinding in brilliance. And the point is that no matter how difficult our passages or how deep the shadows we experience, we are aware of those only because the light is present as well. Just like the candles which adorn our altar (and we have blessed)—they shine as a sign to us of another light. (As C. S. Lewis said, “I believe in Christianity as I believe in the sun...not because I can see it, but because by it I see everything else.”). There is already a gift from God which we call salvation placed into the heart of the world, and perhaps those in pain have the potential to see it all the more clearly, because they have no other place to turn toward. All of us who have come in contact with Jesus have been in some way touched by that light. The question what or who have we seen in Jesus? What he comes to mean in our lives will indicate whether we wish to move toward God or pull back to the shadows. If Simeon is right, God is willing to wait, but is relentless!!!!

So, what is it you see being presented today? Look closely and envision forgiveness and mercy, hope and compassion for your journey. Have there ever been times when you have listened to words, but there was something more than the sounds you heard? Have you ever sensed that there

was more happening than reason or logic could describe? Have you ever experienced a presence that was more than the people around you? Sometimes we come to our sacred places and see as Simeon saw. Seeing Jesus is more than looking for what we expect. It is knowing that nothing is lacking even when circumstances are tough. In those moments we have seen what salvation looks like. It looks like a man who speaks and acts and sacrifices and loves us as God. He is enough. Amen+