

Sermon for February 2, 2020 – “Seeing God’s Future”

The Presentation of Our Lord, Year A – Texts: Luke 2:22-40

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One Easter morning, it’s time for the Children’s moment and so the pastor says to the children, “Children, today is Easter Sunday. What do we celebrate on Easter?” One girl spoke up quickly, “We remember our mothers and how much we love them.” “No, that’s not quite right,” the pastor replied, “You’re thinking of Mother’s Day.” Then, an eager boy took a shot, “Easter is a time when we say, ‘thank you’ to God for all the good things in our lives.” “We can always say do that,” the pastor said, slightly worried, “But, you’re thinking of Thanksgiving, not Easter. “Children, what is the meaning of *Easter*?” After a few seconds of awkward silence another girl gave it a try. “Easter,” she said tentatively, “is the day when we remember that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. Then He was buried in the tomb. On Easter morning, God rolled the stone away and Jesus came out of the tomb.” “Excellent,” cried the relieved pastor. “And then,” the girl continued “Jesus looked and saw His shadow, so He went back into the tomb and there were six more weeks of winter!”

Sorry, I had to tell that one!

Anyway, today is the fourth Sunday after Epiphany and it has a lot of names. We know it as the feast of the Presentation of our Lord, but it’s also called the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary and “Candlemas.” As if that weren’t enough, it’s Super Bowl Sunday and, as most of you know, it’s Groundhog Day. It’s not as big a deal as it used to be for Jane and me growing up in Pittsburgh which is about an hour and a half from Punxsutawney. The Groundhog Day celebration goes at least as far back as 1887 when Germans, Pennsylvania’s earliest settlers, introduced Candlemas Day a Christian holiday celebrated on Feb. 2 to the commonwealth. Now, previously on that date, the halfway point between the winter solstice and spring equinox Germans turned to badgers to predict the future of the weather. But when they moved to Pennsylvania they found another creature to take its place. “The settlers found that groundhogs were plentiful and were the most intelligent and sensible animal to carry on the legend of Candlemas Day...” according to the Punxsutawney Groundhog Club. Of course, the tradition grew in popularity in 1993 when the movie “Groundhog Day” came out. Bill Murray plays a Pittsburgh weatherman in the film who gets trapped in a time warp and has to relive the day over and over again until he gets it right. Waking up at 6AM every morning to the song “I’ve Got You Babe” by Sonny and Cher. Before the movie premiered, Punxsutawney Phil, that’s the rodent’s name, was lucky to have a couple hundred people attend the event. Now thousands of people from across the country travel to the small town of Punxsutawney to a spot in town known as, and I’m not making this up, Gobbler’s Knob where the magic is supposed to happen. Seriously, I’ve actually been there and honestly in the early 1980’s Groundhog Day was not that big of a deal. Besides, Punxsutawney Phil, also known as “the Seer of Seers”, the “Prognosticator of Prognosticators”, has only been right 39% of the time since this tradition got started. So much for a rodent’s ability to predict the future!

Which brings us to the celebration of the Presentation of Our Lord. In today’s Gospel, we have a watershed moment; a picture of Jesus still as the Christ-child, the baby in His mother’s arms taken to Jerusalem to “present Him to the Lord” as the custom was, and to offer a sacrifice. That’s when old Simeon spotted Him. Though the prophet Anna’s contribution is significant, her prophesy describes Jesus in sacrificial language in terms of “redemption”, but we don’t hear her exact words.

So for today at least Simeon is the central figure of our Gospel reading; an old and godly man who, years before had been told he wouldn't die till he'd seen the Messiah with his own two eyes and time, frankly, was running out. When the moment finally came one look was all it took. Simeon recognizes at once that Jesus is the one he has been waiting for, God's promised Savior. And being godly and wise Simeon is able to speak prophetically about who Jesus is. As a man prophesying in the ancient tradition Simeon looks to the Savior of Israel looking back, taking stock but he does more for he sees that this one is breaking wholly new ground! **Master, now You are dismissing Your servant in peace according to Your word for my eyes have seen Your salvation, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to Your people Israel.**" The parents were pleased as punch, of course and so he blessed them too for good measure. Then something about the mother stopped him. What else did Simeon see? The text doesn't say. Whatever it was, it was a long way off, but it was there so plainly he couldn't pretend. And so, this old man proclaims loudly, I'd imagine, **"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed and a sword will pierce your own soul too."** We know what he means don't we? We know that Simeon sees the cross to the place Mary will take at its foot as she sees her Son, now just a baby so weak, so helpless, so fragile, crucified. Simeon probably would've rather bitten off his tongue than say something like that but in that holy place he probably felt he had no choice. He handed back the baby and departed in something less than the perfect peace of which he'd dreamed in all those long years of waiting. Simeon sees things as they are and as they will become. The transforming power of Christ is foreshadowed in this story and we see the seeds of the end of many things because we know that "this child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel." Previously, the story is telling us people had to go to the Temple to be purified to become acceptable to God. But now, Jesus will change all that. He is now and forevermore **"...a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to Your people Israel."** In other words, Jesus is for all people. All people. Period. Full stop.

What's being said by those who favor inclusion, a big, messy Church which so many dread is that God desires mercy not sacrifice, that we are called to allow justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. That, as Malachi says, we must not be like "those who oppress the hired workers in their wages and the widow and the orphan like those who thrust aside the alien." And why is this relevant to today? It's relevant today because today we celebrate the Presentation of our Lord which is all about keeping faith and breaking ground, about maintaining and conserving what's been handed on to us. But it's also about, and this is crucial, moving **forward** to include what's never before been considered, what we might not have been able to imagine, what we may believe cannot be done.

We can't see the future as Simeon did. And thank God we can't see the future as Punxsutawney Phil can! But does it stop us from trying? Does this stop us from trying to predict and project? Sadly, no. No it does not. Why? Well, I'm beginning to think it's because we hate not knowing. We get a little anxious when things go wrong and we start to project what things are going to be like and if you're like me you say: "I'm not cynical, just experienced." We just know that daggone groundhog is going to see his shadow. We just know that we're in for six more weeks of winter. It's that same kind of thinking that tells us that Christianity doesn't really have a future, that it's had its day and for lots of reasons.

Churchgoing statistics certainly make depressing reading and trust me, I've done enough research for my project to tell you that things really do look rather bleak for the Church as a whole. So is the future a church in terminal decline? That's a rather depressing thought especially if one makes their living as a paid clergy person!. But we mustn't forget that this isn't the only way to look at the future and that particular future is **not** inevitable. There's a real danger in looking at the future through fatalistic spectacles. And brother and sisters, here's the thing, what Simeon saw was effectively God's future, the future that God has brought about through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. God's future isn't something that just happens in a fatalistic sense but rather something that's built with God as the master-builder and all of us as the laborers with Christ as the cornerstone. I love the way Psalm 127 puts it, **"Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain."** Let me repeat: **"Unless the Lord builds the house those who build it labor in vain."**

Today we need to be clear that above all else as Christopher Wright said, "It is not that the church of God has a mission to the world but, rather, it is the God of mission who has a church in the world." Let me repeat that, because it's just as important "It is not that the church of God has a mission to the world but, rather, it is the God of mission who has a church in the world." The future is God's – not ours. Where we go, where Westwood First goes as a church is God's doing. What God asks of us is that, like Simeon, we open ourselves completely to him so that we might see God's salvation so that the Holy Spirit might work through us. Then, like Simeon we'll be able to look back and see from whence we've come. We'll be able to recognize the significance of what's going on now in the present and look forward to where we might go in the future. This is a Holy Spirit thing – praise God!

The progress of the church isn't something we can engineer in our own right but can achieve only by God working **within** us and **through** us. And this should be a big part, if it isn't already, of our definition of faithfulness.

Finally, getting back to Simeon, he could've easily contented himself with gazing in wonder at the infant Jesus and saying nothing but positive things. But he didn't. He also looked forward. And what he saw was a future that was troubled, most definitely, but which ultimately saw God's purpose worked out through the death and resurrection of Jesus. My prayer for our congregation, especially for our Elders and Deacons and for all of us called by the name of Christ, is that we might have the ability to see as Simeon did God's salvation in unlikely people and strange places to recognize God's redeeming work in the world around us and a faith courageous enough to proclaim it and respond as Simeon did.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.