

## **The Presentation of our Lord - Luke 2.22-40**

Thirty years ago, one of the popular films was Harold Ramis's "Groundhog Day." While the film wasn't a huge box office success, it was a hit with critics, and it has become perhaps more popular since then—it's one of those films that sort of grows on you as you discover the deeper dimensions of what seems a rather superficial comedy. It tells the story of Phil Connors, played by Bill Murray. Phil is a TV weatherman, who finds himself, pretty much against his will, in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania to report on the anticipated traditional appearance of the famous groundhog whose view of his shadow will indicate whether we get an early spring or a longer winter.

But what happens to Phil is like something out of science fiction. He stumbles through his day, he gets stuck in Punxsutawney because of a blizzard, and when he wakes up the next morning, he discovers that it isn't the next morning at all. It is Groundhog Day all over again. He faces the same situations, the same people, the same events—the only thing that he is able to change, it seems, is his own reaction and response to what happens. The next morning it is the same thing again, and then again. More than thirty times, he wakes up and finds it is still Groundhog Day.

### **Groundhog Day in Church**

Perhaps you felt a little like Phil on this Groundhog Day when we read the gospel lesson. These last few weeks, we've heard about Jesus' baptism, his first miracle at the wedding in Cana, his initial sermon in Nazareth, and now we're back to the infant Jesus brought to the Temple by his mother and father, in order to fulfill the Jewish law governing newborns.

The reason for this time loop is that today, in addition to being Groundhog Day, is, in the church's calendar, the festival of the Presentation of Our Lord. It has been celebrated since at least the fifth century, and at least when it falls on a Sunday, Lutherans often give it a nod. And truth be told, the very secular tradition of "Groundhog Day" has historical roots that relate it to this Christian festival—but it's way too complicated to try to explain, so I'll just let you Google it!

And yet, strange as it may seem, the moral lesson from the movie "Groundhog Day" is also not unrelated to our Scripture lessons this morning. Here we have Mary and Joseph, bringing this child—this child whom we know is God incarnate—bringing this child to the Temple, as prescribed in the law. Here is the aged Simeon, who has been promised he will not die until he has seen the Messiah, and who now recognizes Jesus and prays, "Lord, now you let your servant go in peace." Here is aged Anna, who sees the connection between this child and those looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. And here is Luke's comment that after this was over, they took Jesus back to Nazareth, where he grew in wisdom and in stature.

## **The Gift of Time**

These all have to do with time, you see. The ordinary process of human existence. One day after the other. It may be that the time is long—Simeon had been waiting so many years! It may be that the time is ordinary, like a child, growing day by day, imperceptibly but constantly. It may be that the time is lonely, as with Anna who had been widowed so many years ago. But the days go by, one by one. Unlike Phil, we do not get to do them over.

Christian faith teaches that time is a great gift, that it is imbedded in the very meaning of God's creation, this God who created days and nights and called them good. This seems so obvious to us, but it is not true of many of the world's religions. Eastern religions generally see time as an illusion. Existence for them is cyclical, repeating itself over and over. That's really the root of the teaching of reincarnation—the idea that we keep coming back, experiencing life again, though in a different way.

But Christianity teaches something very different. Christianity teaches that time is linear, progressive, that it is moving toward an end. Each day is unique; each day is a gift. Each day is an opportunity to praise God, to drink in the wonder of his love; each day an opportunity to serve, to share that love with others. We don't get to do our days over again.

That's one reason why one of the most important and useful spiritual disciplines is to take a few moments at the end of the day and reflect on what has happened to you that day. How have you sinned, and fallen short of what God wants you to be? How has God blessed you? What good have you received, and what good have you given? These are questions that can help us to appreciate and embrace the gift that was today, and also to look forward with eagerness to the gift that will be tomorrow.

## **Peace at the Last**

In my last parish, our council meetings often closed by praying together the traditional service of Compline, also known as Prayer at the Close of the Day. It is a wonderful liturgy. It begins with these words: "The Lord Almighty grant us a quiet night and peace at the last." At one meeting, after we'd been doing this for a while, someone asked, "What does that mean, exactly? 'Peace at the last'?" Of course, the answer is that it is talking about our death. Christians have often drawn a kind of parallel between our falling asleep at night, and our final falling asleep in God's arms. We learn this connection even from childhood: "If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." That is not a morbid fear, but a realization that each night, when we go to sleep, it is a kind of anticipation of the end of life. Just as each day has its joys and sorrows, so does our life. Just as each day moves slowly but irrevocably onward, so does our life. Just as each day offers its own opportunities and challenges which will not be repeated, so does our life. Just as each day comes to its end, so does our life.

Simeon's words in our gospel lesson are also a part of this liturgy for the close of the day: "Lord, now let your servant go in peace..." You see, that is a beautiful prayer before sleeping, but also a

prayer before dying. He is saying that his life has been full, and that he is now ready for rest. His work is done. God's purpose for him has been fulfilled.

### **Each Day a Gift**

The challenge for us, you see, is to cultivate that sense of things every day of our life. It is to accept each day as a gift, to be used and directed as God intends. It is to come to each night with thanksgiving, and with confidence that even as we sleep, we are in God's tender care, knowing that God neither slumbers nor sleeps.

Sometimes it may seem to us that Phil's situation might actually have some advantages. How often we'd love to take back a word we said, or a deed we did—to have a chance to face the day again and make different choices. But we don't have that chance. We have something better—the grace to lie down in peace, to commit the day, with all its successes and failures, its joys and sorrows, to God; and to know that, like Simeon, we have seen the light of Christ and so we rejoice. Amen.