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Presentation of Our Lord
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Lectionary Year A: Luke 2:22-40

Answers.

People come to church wanting answers. They appeal to the authority of Scripture, or of a pastor, or of a bishop or even a pope. The definitive answer must be out there somewhere, so they think. I can't tell you how many times people have assumed that I have a breadth and depth of knowledge (and, hence, answers) that no one else has...simply because I'm ordained. If I may be blunt, I went to seminary to learn the history of Christianity, methods of theology, the Old and New Testaments, preaching, and pastoral care; never was the whole of human knowledge handed over to me in some secret ceremony. Thus, there always will be questions for which I'll freely admit that I have no answer. I'd even go so far as to say that persons in my vocation who seem to have all the answers are the ones you should avoid if at all possible.

The hunger for answers seems to have escalated over the past couple decades, partially due to the perception of some that their cherished old world is slipping away. One can trace this directly to the increasing degree of openness toward what were once taboo subjects -- things like human sexuality, drugs, and our "off-the-clock" behaviors. Of course, openness leads to acceptance by some and resistance by others; those who resist tend to see society crumbling before their very eyes, with many pointing to things like gender-neutral restrooms or the pronouns ("he/him/his" or "she/her/hers") one uses to identify oneself. Interestingly, over the course of history, every time an alarmist warns of society's implosion in times of great social change, the culture adapts and moves on

in spite of all the fear-mongering surrounding it. Look, in particular, to the civil rights movement sixty years ago; equal rights for African Americans was to be, in the minds of many, a scourge that would ruin a way of life.

But we made it through that and we're still here!

Looking for answers in times of change can go one of two ways; it can either seek answers that justify resistance to change, or it can seek answers that challenge the seeker to think differently. Sure, you can find "authorities" out there who will tell you that, if "x," "y," and "z" happen within the next decade, our social fabric will completely unravel. Yet I don't see how this would encourage one to stretch oneself intellectually or spiritually; in fact, I think it would lead one to great panic and paranoia. And sometimes, the only answer is no answer, where the implications are unknown and the future is uncertain. I'd say that's a perfect place for faith to enter the picture!

It seems unwise to ride the status quo into the future, under the assumption that life will be safe and predictable because we never challenge ourselves or think differently. At best, this would amount to a collective sticking-our-heads-in-the-sand. The truth is that some of us might not like what society will bring in the future. But then think of the gift of perspective; what seem like massive changes to the social fabric over the course of a decade are but a tiny blip on the radar of humanity's centuries-old history. As I see (particularly on social media) people throwing themselves into fits of apoplexy over everything from the current presidential administration to Brexit, I can't help but see a lack of perspective among many.

So we march on into an unknowable future, which is in no way different from any other period of history. (Duh!) And there may not be many answers, but instead

only a myriad of questions. What we do know is that the genie, so to speak, cannot be put back into the bottle. Speaking personally, as a person who considers himself born forty years too late, I happen to be a student of decades that I didn't have the opportunity to witness -- the Fifties and Sixties, in particular. Over those two decades, all sorts of figurative "genies" were being let out of the bottle. The Fifties' Rosa Parks grew into the Sixties' Civil Rights Movement. The Fifties' beatniks became the Sixties' hippies. The Fifties' Kinsey Report helped give birth to the Sixties' Sexual Revolution...and so on and so forth. To the consternation of many, we cannot completely undo the changes that have occurred over the last six decades and go back to an Eisenhower-era Garden of Eden.

It's just not possible. And much as I like to think fondly of the past, I'm actually quite picky about which parts of it I'll idealize; spark plugs, breaker points, and carburetors are not matters of great importance like liberty and justice for all...

So how do we respond to an unknowable future? As today is the festival of the Presentation of Our Lord, we recognize the awesome gravity of Jesus' destiny; this little child was to be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to [God's] people Israel" (Luke 2:32). Notice, though, that what lay ahead of Jesus wasn't exactly rosy. The old man Simeon says to Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and 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" (Luke 2:34b-35).

One would think that Simeon's words would cast a gloomy pall over what we'd assume to be a day of great festivity. Think about it -- an old man says to a

mother, gazing lovingly at her baby, "Your child is going to suffer...and you will, too." Not exactly happy news, regardless of its accuracy! But then think about what this means for the rest of humanity; we're granted this Child of God who doesn't float over life's sufferings and uncertainties, but instead enters right into them. I think that, when we're looking for "clarity" and "answers," we're actually looking for someone to show some compassion for our struggles.

And Jesus does this like no one else! "What a friend we have in Jesus," so goes the old hymn, "all our sins and griefs to bear!"

We emphasize on this festival Jesus as Light. Yes, presenting Jesus in the temple for the requisite rites of passage is the apparent focus of the day, but right here in the midst of all that activity is an acclamation of Jesus' purpose -- to be a light unto the world and to redeem all people. And if you want an example of an uncertain future in the eyes of mortals, look to Mary and Joseph. We can grumble endlessly about the unraveling of society's fabric in an amoral future, but think of the age in which Jesus was born. His native land was occupied, his people were persecuted, and the succession of Roman emperors would make the current president look like Moses himself. What we're lacking is, as I mentioned earlier, a good chunk of perspective, along with an understanding that Jesus, with Mary and Joseph, walks into the future with both compassion and courage.

Look to that light that Jesus brings to the world, and see that he leads the path into a future for us -- one that is hopefully more just, more loving, and more forgiving. These are the sorts of Christian values that may not provide all the answers, but will certainly be able to ask some important questions, like

Who is my neighbor?

How do I get along with people I disagree with?

and Where do we find our unity?

You see, whether society stands or falls depends not on having the right answers, but rather on asking the right questions. We, as Christians, are called not merely to preach, but to inquire and challenge. People of faith have been a vital part of cultural changes for the better, from Desmond Tutu in South Africa to Martin Luther King in the American South. But we have to recognize the Light shining among us, and allow it to illuminate our flaws and lead us to something better. Most of all, we have to find our unity in Christ, and see him not as a proponent of or crusader against our favorite causes, but as a reconciling power for all things good and just. Believe me, there is nothing "Republican" or "Democratic" or "red" or "blue" about that!

Answers.

We want them. We covet them. We look longingly for them. Yet, as Christians, we often find ourselves somewhere like Mary hearing the words of Simeon. "The future is going to be rough." End of sentence. Not a satisfying answer, not a reassuring answer. But there's much more to the story, as you know. This baby Jesus will become the One who accompanies us into rough and uncertain futures, and we can take comfort in the knowledge that he can bear the brunt of whatever life throws at us. And while that may not be a very satisfying answer, may it at least open your eyes to his Light shining upon you.

Amen.