

Beginning at the End

The Presentation of Our Lord, Series A

Luke 2:22-32

When you know the ending it shapes how you think and act in the beginning and the middle. Recently I decided to read, or in some cases, re-read, the books of movies that have made it to the big screen. I decided to do this before watching the movie counterparts. Some might say this is a big mistake that can only lead to a disappointing and frustrating movie viewing experience. Some might think that it would be difficult then to appreciate the movie on its own merit. It is frustrating at times, as I am sure you all can relate, to see favorite parts of your favorite books left out of a movie version. Yet, I have also found it much easier to pay attention and appreciate the whole movie, particularly the subtle scenes and otherwise mundane details.

When a person knows the whole of a story—how it begins, develops, and ends—it actually helps you to better appreciate another version of it on its own merits. You know exactly where the retelling or other version is on point and where it veered from the original.

I would like to propose this morning that, as Christians who are new creations baptized into Christ and his death and resurrection, you and I know the ending. It is a good ending. Knowing the ending makes today and tomorrow and all of its subtle scenes and otherwise mundane details worth living. We are baptized, adopted sons and daughters of Christ, children of God who believe and trust in our Heavenly Father not on the basis of our story or our merits, but on the basis of God's salvation story through Jesus and the merits of his death and resurrection. On the Last Day when God, the Father looks at you he will see a new creation in Christ. He will see his Son. For that reason you can be ever certain of your ending—a peace-filled departure by the grace and mercy of God.

Today is the day of a big event. Today is the day we celebrate the feast of the presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple according to the Jewish laws and customs of which Jesus was born into. You didn't think I was going to refer to *that* big event, did you? No, especially not on Super Bowl Sunday. Everyone knows that people are scheduling their day today around the "big game." And it is okay to be excited about the Super Bowl. After all, we do live as citizens in this world even if we are not "of the world." I am excited to watch a good game tonight. I am excited to watch some funny commercials. I am waiting to see how the game will end. But as Christians we also know that a "big game" is not the sum total of our lives. It is not even the sum total of any one day, even if it is "Super Bowl Sunday." Rather, as Christians who are the baptized, believing children of God, we order our days "in Christ" even as we live in this world. This is why the event of the presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple *is* actually a big deal for us, even if it isn't a big deal for those outside the Church.

In the presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple as we heard it read in our Gospel reading, the man Simeon comes face-to-face with his "ending." Simeon meets the Lord's Christ. He was promised that he would not see the end of his days and experience a physical death until he had seen Jesus, the Lord's Christ. Sure enough, that promised day came. Simeon literally held salvation in his hands. He then could say, "I will depart in peace." He is assured of a good ending, a peace-filled ending. God promised it and, as he always does for us, God delivered on his promise. Simeon saw, believed

and literally embraced the promise of God's salvation and brought good things for him. Simeon's belief, trust, and embracing of the promise of God brought joy, thanksgiving, and blessing. He was promised a peaceful departure, an eternal life, a blessed end. He saw the promise, experienced it, believed it, trusted in it, embraced it, and it shaped the way he lived until his end, the moment of his death.

Since we, like Simeon, know, believe, trust, and embrace God's promise of a peaceful departure, an eternal life, a blessed end for us, how does it shape the living of our days until that moment? How do we live *today* "according to the Word of promise?"

One way that a parish can live its life together in view of the confidence of each parishioners "peaceful departure according to God's Word of promise" is by being more intentional about letting that Word of promise guide our actions for the future. We are a people of God's promise. We are a baptized people. We are a people in Christ. We are a people gathered around God's promised Word in the proclamation of the Gospel and the Sacraments. This is our identity. This is the Word that guides and directs us. A word of fear does not guide us. A word of doubt does not direct us. A word of anxiety does not control us and our vision for the future. We are a people of promise. We know the end and so can be bold and courageous in our ministry together as a congregation now and for the rest of our tomorrows! We, like Simeon, embrace God's promise in Christ and it makes all the difference, even for you on this Super Bowl Sunday.

Just listen to some of God's promises for you. "... For the Lord my God will be with me, wherever I go" (Joshua 1:9). "I (the Lord) will never leave you or forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). "I am with you, always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). "The peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard my heart and mind in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7). Great promises that assure you, as a believer in Christ, a peace-filled end.

There is a movie that came out a number of years ago with which you may be familiar. It is called *Big Fish*. No, I have not read the book. Yet, there is a scene in the movie in which the lead character, Edward Bloom, learns how he is going to die. Edward says to one of the other characters during the film, "I was thinking about death and all. About seeing how you're gonna die. I mean, on one hand, if dying was all you thought about, it could kind of screw you up. But it could kind of help you, couldn't it? Because you'd know that everything else you can survive." In another scene during the movie Edward acts as the narrator and narrates his daunting confrontation with a giant. He says, "Armed with the foreknowledge of my own death, I knew the giant couldn't kill me." Brothers and sisters in Christ you live now knowing confidently that whenever the Lord should ordain it, that you will depart to eternal life in the peace of God. Through the resurrection of Christ from the dead, death is conquered once and for all—you survive all through him. "Nothing will separate you from the love of Christ" (Ro 8:35) because in Christ "you are more than conquerors" (Ro 8:37). Now you live today and each day armed with the knowledge that no giant has claim over you—no sin, no temptation, no vice—nothing. In spite of all you *live* in peace with your God!

Two months into a recent uprising in the country of Ukraine, the political crisis still seems far from any resolution. Protests are escalating. Amidst burned buses, tear gas and barricades, however, there is another sight that stands out on the dangerous and violent frontline: The strong numbers of Orthodox priests who have turned out, not to protest, but rather to pray (Huffington Post). Armed with God's peace they live and act boldly and fearlessly. Assured of God's peace for them in Christ, their foremost concern now is for others to know that peace that surpasses all human understanding. Beginning at the end and living each day according to God's word of peace and promise. Amen.