

Sermon for the Feast of the Presentation: Luke 2:22-40

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Ignorance is bliss. We've all said that at some point or another, or at least, I've said it enough in my time to balance out those of you've that've never said it. It's a common enough phrase, but the more I learn about this world, the more conflicted I am about ignorance. See, if happiness is what you're hoping for, if that's the greater good you strive for and all other things take second shrift, then sure. Ignorance is pretty great. You don't have to know about all the terrible things. On the other hand, these days our knowledge of the world goes far beyond it ever has, and the more we know about the day-to-day goings on of all the countries in the world, sure, the less ignorance we have, but lord, that's a heavy weight to bear. I have a friend who studied political science for a while. Turns out, she had to know the awful complexities of just about every conflict, big or small, everywhere in the world. Human suffering was her thesis statement. Why it happened was her problem to solve. As you might imagine, she cried herself to sleep every night for three semesters under the weight of that impossible question. And finally, she took the easy way out and switched to a double major in engineering and astrophysics with a minor in organic chemistry. At least those questions had answers.

Ignorance is bliss. I can buy a block of cheddar from the store and never pause to think about the repercussions of my purchase. All I care about is if it's been aged enough for those yummy little salt crystals to start forming. I don't need to know about subsidies or the rising rate of farm foreclosures. As long as it's good and, better yet, cheap, I'm happy. But who ever said happy should be the goal? Ignorance is bliss, to an extent. My ignorance and my bliss feed off each other. But they also make me complicit in all sorts of stuff without me even knowing. Sometimes, my ignorance is the foundation for evil's done on my behalf.

Last Sunday, when I preached about the humanity of those fellas that showed up from ICE, I want us to hold onto that. Those regular guys showing up to work just as easily could've been opening the window at the DMV. But they've somehow divorced their paper pushing from the human cost on the other side. Today, it's that other side I want us to see because our bliss isn't worth what they suffer.

Now, I can't tell you too much of the story. Telling the story might put them at risk, so I'll say what I can, and I beg your prayers for them. The family's torn apart already. The father's being held in a facility outside of Buffalo. He was picked up about two weeks ago while getting medicine for his kids; the inspection sticker didn't line up, and the plates didn't match the vehicle. For that heinous crime, those fellas from ICE got called. And unless some drastic change comes, he'll be deported sometime this week. His wife and kids are still at home, and they face a terrible decision. While navigating their own questions about safety and security here, do they try to stick it out and give the kids a chance at the American Dream? Or do they try to get back to where they started in the hopes of reuniting with their dad? To complicate matters further, we all know that ICE deports people. I learned this week that they don't always deport them back to their country of origin. So, if this mother were to decide to pick up the kids and go back, there's no guarantee that back is where he'd be! But what if she decides to stay here? She has permission to stay, granted by ICE, so long as she stays registered with them, but staying registered with them means they can change their mind whenever they like and deport her anyway. If that happens, there's no guarantee her kids would be sent with her. And why are they even here in the first place? Well, their old home was a dangerous place to be, dangerous enough to make the extraordinarily difficult way here worth it in exchange for getting out of Dodge. Worth a father finding safe work. Worth kids having safe places to play. Worth a mother risking them all on the gamble. And now she faces one of the worst choices I can imagine: the hell she knew before or the hell she knows now? Ignorance may be bliss for me, but my ignorance is hell for her.

Jesus once told his disciples they'd failed him. He said, "I was hungry, and you gave me no food. I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink. I was a stranger and you did not welcome me. Naked and you did not clothe me. In prison and you did not visit me. And when did you see me hungry or thirsty or naked or in prison? As you did to the least of these, you did to me." That Jesus has a similar story, you know. We tend to remember his childhood with fondness. We threw quite the party for his birth. Today, we celebrate the Presentation, when Baby Jesus and Mary both go to the temple at the appointed time to be presented back into society. Everyone coos and fawns over the newborn, but only a pair of prophets, Simeon and Anna, see him for who he is. They see his humanity, but they see more still. Both are in their twilight years, and they've waited their whole lives to get a glimpse of the Messiah. And here he is, just a child, but finally, here.

Simeon's words thrill me: Lord, you now have set your servant free, to go in peace as you have promised. These eyes of mine have seen the Savior, whom you have prepared for all the world to see, a light to enlighten the nations and the glory of your people Israel. So much hope and so much joy wrapped up in that mother's arms. Ignorance is bliss, for they know not what trials he'll suffer. Only a little while later, Jesus'll be carried across deserts with his family escaping the dangers of their home. He'll return, of course, to greatness but also to death. And yet, it is us he'll carry, our weight. But in that temple, where everyone could see his humanity, only a few could see more. Lord help us all, when the sacred in another person isn't even an option. And Lord help us still, when it's their humanity that can't be seen.

Now that line we all know -- ignorance is bliss -- comes from a poem it turns out. But just a few lines before that old cliche, there's another gem we've forgotten. The poet says, "To each his sufferings: all are men, condemned alike to groan, the tender for another's pain, the unfeeling for his own." May we be the tender. May we look for humanity. And in our ignorance, may we watch for Christ.