

Feast of the Presentation February 2, 2020
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Groundhog Day
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

The 1993 movie *Groundhog Day* has had a profound influence on our society and culture. Now, hear me out: Since the movie's release, the term "Groundhog Day" has become commonly used in the English language and American culture to refer to an unpleasant situation that someone can't seem to get out of. The military uses it to refer to the times they are not engaged in purposeful work or down time. The term is also used by spiritual and religious people to refer to a spiritual transcendence.

The movie *Groundhog Day* seems to share a lot in common with the day itself – it is a confluence of different parts of culture that have merged together because they all seek the same things: relief and hope. This may be why the movie remains popular and has even been named one of the 20 most religious movies of all time, not just for Christians, but for Buddhists, Jews, and people of other religions.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the movie, it's a story of a man named Phil who is unhappy in his work as a weatherman for local television station. At the movie's beginning, Phil is feeling stuck, bored and frustrated with his life and career; he seems to want something different but isn't clear about what he wants, what changes he wants to make or how to make a change. When he was given the assignment to report live from Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania on Groundhog Day, he responded by feeling demoted instead of promoted. Phil didn't seem to know what he wanted, but he knew he didn't want to report on the Groundhog Day festivities and the groundhog who shares his name's weather report for how many weeks of winter are left.

In spite of his feelings, Phil went to Punxsutawney, did a lame report, met other reporters and local residents of the quaint town, but was impolite with all of them, stayed overnight in a local bed and breakfast, and woke up the next morning to the exact same day he had just lived through starting all over again. This is the premise of the movie: Phil is trapped in a time loop, in a day that repeats over and over and over and over and over again. He is literally stuck in his own life. No guru or scientific expert or wise character emerges to tell him why or how this happened or how to get out of the time loop. He is left on his own to try and figure it out.

At first, Phil responded to this situation by living selfishly and indulgently: eating too much of whatever he wanted, drinking too much of whatever he wanted, buying whatever he wanted, and having one-night stands. When he got bored with that lifestyle, he decided to try and better himself and used the seemingly never-ending time he had to learn new skills and educate himself more about history, poetry, and,

especially anything that might impress one of the other reporters in town to cover the Groundhog Day festivities: a woman named Rita he was attracted to but she was unimpressed with his shallow and selfish behavior and values. When trying to improve his knowledge and skills didn't get him out of the time loop, he tried to destroy the groundhog which he figured somehow played a part in his being stuck living Groundhog Day over and over. But that attempt failed to start a new day, and February 2, Groundhog Day still started over. A lot of the comedy in the movie comes from Phil's persistence. When trying to kill the groundhog didn't work, Phil switched tactics and tried doing good, using his situation like a superpower to learn about the people in the town, their needs and concerns, and help them with whatever problems they had. But even his good deeds didn't change his situation. Every morning, the same day started the same. Finally, he stopped spending all his time living selfishly or trying to manipulate the situation to make the change he wanted to happen, and instead started paying attention to Rita, the woman he was attracted to. He gradually learned to stop pretending to be what she told him she wanted and started to be himself. This made him vulnerable, so much so he fell in love, and Rita, seeing who Phil really was, fell in love with him. That is when the much-anticipated new day dawned for Phil, one washed clean of the stuff that had gotten in the way of living a meaningful life: a day bringing relief and hope.

Perhaps you can see why so many people of different religious beliefs embrace this movie. It seems all religions can relate to being stuck in a place where people ask the deeply spiritual question: will it always be winter? Will life always feel dark, cold, damp, and lifeless no matter what I do? That's the question we put to a groundhog every February 2. It's a question the spiritual have long asked God, not once a year, but over and over and over and over again, day after day after day.

It's also the question that is part of the church's celebration today. The Presentation of Jesus in the temple, as we read in today's Gospel. Luke's Gospel stated repeatedly Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the temple for religious rituals that were part of pious religious practice. Seems the author of Luke's Gospel wants to make sure we all know and understand Jesus came from a good Jewish family. One that followed the rules. Jesus also comes from a poor family, one that couldn't afford the proper offering of a lamb for this celebration and brought an offering that represented their poverty instead. And on the way to this ritual, they encountered two people who had been asking God how much longer the spiritual winter was going to last: Simeon and Anna. This was not quite the same spiritual winter as Phil in the movie *Groundhog Day* experienced, but both Simeon and Anna seem to know the suffering of their people, a suffering of Roman occupation, a suffering of feeling the distance between God and God's people. A suffering they long to see ended by the arrival of God's salvation.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, we heard Simeon was drawn to Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus, in whom he saw the dawning of that much anticipated new day. The hope that the spiritual winter won't last forever had just walked into the temple. The time had come. And in good biblical tradition, Simeon marked the occasion with a song and a prayer, one that expresses relief and hope, especially that hope the winter is nearly over: and is a prayer our prayer book uses for Evening Prayer: "Lord, you now have set your servant free to go in peace as you have promised, for 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."

And as the author of Luke's Gospel told us, when Mary and Joseph heard these words from Simeon, they were amazed. Amazed. Which sounds sort of odd, doesn't it? Why would they be amazed? After all, they've had nothing but amazing experiences around the birth of Jesus. There was Mary's visit by an angel who told her what Jesus was going to grow up to be, and the shepherds showing up at the manger repeating the words the angels spoke to them when they were in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night. You'd think by now amazing would be part of their norm. Or maybe they weren't amazed by Simeon's words, maybe they were amazed someone else recognized their baby as the Savior. Maybe the word amazing meant for Joseph and Mary realizing the joy and weight of responsibility of caring for and raising Jesus.

But Simeon wasn't done, he had more words for Mary, words that would be tough for any parent to hear: the child would be God's salvation, but not in a way that would bring any of them comfort or stability. Just the opposite, in fact. Jesus was destined to bring about opposition; his life, death, and resurrection will not only bring that new day and new life, it will also expose the true thoughts and values and fears of many. And all this will be painful, so much so Mary will feel her own soul suffer. In other words, God's Savior isn't going to wipe out suffering for God's faithful. Instead, God's Savior will take on the sufferings of world by sharing that suffering with all people of the world. That is how Jesus is to be that light to all nations, to all people. Maybe this revelation is what made Anna rejoice in today's Gospel: somehow Jesus was already bringing good news to all people, the news the winter is nearing its end and spring, new life is coming and everyone can experience what it feels like to wake up to a new day, one rich with possibility and God's love instead of one destined to feel like suffering through all the other days.

I know it is not always easy to hope. I understand it can feel like all the news is bad, and no matter what we do, things don't change, that yet another day dawns with clouds covering up the sun. It can feel like it will always be winter. This is a shared experience for people in many different places in life, different ages, races, religions, genders, economic status, education levels, marital status. No matter who we are, we

can all understand feeling stuck at times; that might be why so many different people still love a 27 year old romantic comedy that is ultimately about how hard it can be to wait for the spring, for that new day.

What the movie *Groundhog Day* and Simeon and Anna in today's Gospel all have in common isn't just how hard it is to wait for that new day. They show us no matter how hard it is to wait, that new day is coming, and when it arrives, when the dreary and tired old ways finally depart, there is a sweetness to the air that refreshes tired souls and a brightness of light that restores courage and joy. The truth is: There is no winter that lasts forever, and there is no spring that isn't worth the wait.

Whatever the groundhogs tell us about winter and spring today, we can keep our hearts and eyes turned to God, to be on the lookout for the ways Jesus does appear in our lives, and share in the amazement such love and hope shines into the world, that can make any day feel like a new day.