

Groundhog Day

Lamentations 3: 22-24; Matthew 6:25-34

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I. Introduction

About a decade ago, the Museum of Modern Art in New York held a film series that they entitled *The Hidden God: Faith and Film*, so it's sort of what we're doing for our sermon series here in July, focusing on great religious films of the 20th Century, and they took a survey of a number of significant theologians and professors of literature around the country to see what movies got held up as some of those greatest movies and all of the sort of ones that you would expect, the great weighty, serious, intellectual films by Ingmar Bergman or Rossellini made it into that list, but the curators of this exhibit were surprised by one repeated entry that many of the theologians put in that they had not expected which was a romantic comedy called *Groundhog Day*. And so many of the theologians put this in that there was actually some debate between them about who got to write up the piece for the write-up for the exhibit on this.

We're spending these weeks in July exploring themes of redemption in the movies and we got off to a wonderful start last week with *Frozen* and we're continuing this week with what is one of my favorite films which is *Groundhog Day*, so I'm excited to have the chance to reflect on this with you a little bit.

II. The Redemption of Phil Connors

In the movie, as many of you know, Bill Murray plays a weatherman in Pittsburgh, he's a weatherman for Channel 9 Pittsburgh, and he's a pretty unattractive character. He's arrogant. He's selfish. He's very world weary. He's very cynical. So, he's not an evil character but he's an unattractive character who spends a lot of time putting other people down and complaining about the state of his life. And much to his disgust, he is sent for the fourth year in a row to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania where he's covering the annual Groundhog Festival. Punxsutawney is where they pull the groundhog out and ask the groundhog if it sees its shadow and whether or not winter will last for another six weeks. Well, Phil Connors, Bill Murray, has done this three times before. It's old, it's tired, he's tired of it, but his producer sends him up there with a crew of two people to cover this yet again with him griping and complaining all the way.

So, they get there the night before the festival and wake up bright and early because this thing starts at an early morning hour, and he goes and does the film piece for the news, and they pack the van up and head back to Pittsburgh but they get caught in a snowstorm and have to return to Punxsutawney where they spend another night in their hotels, and Phil wakes up the next morning and he hears the radio playing exactly the same song it had played the day before. And because he's cynical and jaded, he just assumed it's a little, tiny, small town radio station, they played yesterday's tape by

accident, and he goes on with his morning only to realize that it is actually the same day over again. It's still February 2nd and all of the things that he experienced the day before, nobody else has experienced. He's repeating this day but it's the first time everybody else has experienced it.

So, it kind of freaks him out understandably but he goes through the motions and goes through the day. He's again kept by the snowstorm up in Punxsutawney and he wakes up again and it's still February 2nd. And so, he starts this sequence of re-experiencing Groundhog Day over and over and over again. Now when he first starts to realize that this is happening, he starts to figure out that if there's no tomorrow, there is no ramifications to what I do today, and therefore he starts to act in very inappropriate ways because there're no ramifications.

So, he flaunts the traffic laws, he steals a big bag of money from an armored truck, he seduces a local woman which he's able to do because he's learned about her over these repeated days. So, he lets free all of the very unattractive pieces of his character. He also starts about trying to romantically engage the woman who is the producer that he's brought up with him. Andie MacDowell plays the role of Rita. And so, he spends lots and lots of these repeated days learning all about Rita and what she loves and what things are a part of her history that he can tap into, and over and over again trying to romantically engage her without any success. And eventually all of this expressing of his unattractive sides sends him into sort of a spiral of depression when he realizes that he can't change where he is, what he's doing, her, and is just overwhelmed by the meaninglessness of this endless repetition.

And so, he figures the only way to get out of this cycle is to steal the Groundhog Phil which he does and the two of them drive off a cliff as he commits suicide, and then wakes up at six o'clock the next morning as though nothing happened. So, then there's a long series of scenes in which he tries to kill himself in various and sundry ways, trying to do anything he can to put an end to this cycle, to get out of this repeated day and he can't do it.

And so, finally at the end of this long series, he has a long conversation with Rita, with Andie MacDowell about being stuck in this place and they spend the day together reflecting on what it means to be stuck in this repeated pattern. It's actually in this scene that we have the one actual theological dialogue in the entire movie in which Bill Murray says, "Maybe God's not omniscient. Maybe he's just been around so long, He knows everything." Because He knows everything. But at the end of the day, Andie MacDowell says, "You know, Phil, maybe this isn't a curse. Maybe it's a blessing." And something happens in Phil's perspective that changes. And the next morning he gets up, it's the same day but he starts engaging the day a little differently. He starts engaging the people around him a little differently. And over the rest of the film you see Phil going through the same day over and over again but he keeps growing as a person. He grows in generosity, he grows in his own spiritual depth, and that by the end of the movie, as he experiences yet another of these days, all the pieces seem to

click and Rita finally falls in love with him and he wakes up the next day and it's February 3rd and the cycle is over.

III. Everyday Salvation

Now, one of the interesting questions is, why did all these theologians writing to MoMA identified this as an important theological film? And it was people from all different theological positions across the spectrum: Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, and as you just heard, there's very little actual dialogue about God in the film. But it is a very compelling film about redemption for this one reason, I think, most films about redemption, most stories about redemption, build to a climax where the protagonist has to make an important decision, a change of life that then changes everything that happens afterwards.

So, like in *Frozen* last week, we heard about Elsa being consumed by her fear and then finally coming to this huge change where she's able to overcome her fear and engage the people around her in love and joy. It is in many ways the paradigm for what redemption has looked like in much of Christian thought. So, when we talk about being born again, that's sort of redemption model where people come to a climactic experience of the power of Jesus Christ in their lives and everything changes, that's the paradigm anyway.

But many of us never have that single, born again moment. For many of us, our deepening journey with God is one that happens and happened over a long period. And one of the wonderful things about *Groundhog Day* is it is a story of redemption that happens in the very ordinariness of our ongoing daily lives. There is no dramatic moment in which Phil Connors changes who he is. He makes a decision that then he starts to live out in this repeated day in different and growing ways. So, his redemption, his salvation happens right in the midst of a very ordinary day.

We have an expression of this wonderful passage from Lamentations that God's mercy is new every morning and every morning we have an opportunity to engage it anew, and that's what we see in this wonderful story of *Groundhog Day*. So, how does Phil go about engaging differently that allows him to experience this transformation? A couple of points jump out as you watch the film. One is that Phil makes a decision to re-engage his job in a different sort of way. Now this is -- stay with me on this for just a minute. This is an interesting point for me.

Phil has done the same weather report now with Punxsutawney Phil now for some indeterminate period of time. It's the same thing he's doing every single day. But something happens to Phil and he starts to engage that in a different way. So, he comes and instead of his usual cynical snide comments about the people around him and about this job, he comes the next morning after he's made this decision with coffee and Danishes for his two colleagues. Well, that's a new thing for them. He says, "You know, I talked to Buster, the head groundhog guy, and he said maybe we'll get a better shot over here." He starts trying to engage his job and make it better. And we see this

day after day through the second part of the movie as Phil every day tries to engage his job better and differently, so by the end of the film he's doing the same weather piece that he's been doing for who knows how many mornings but he does it with such power and conviction that everybody around him stops and listens to the beauty of his words and the power of what he says and applauds when the weather report is done.

I think that's a very compelling picture about what it means to engage our work life differently. Because work often feels like an endless grind of the same thing, one day after another, right? I often come home at the end of the day and talk to Jeannine and say, "How was your day?" And she says, "Well, I pushed the rock up a little farther on the hill." You know, that Sisyphus picture of it's an endless, endless process. And sometimes it gets pretty discouraging.

There's a wonderful scene when Phil is in a bowling alley with two of the locals and they're having a beer and he's really depressed at this point, he says, "What would you do if you were stuck in the same place and if every day was the same and if nothing you did ever mattered?" And there's this silence, and then one of the guys says, "That just about sums it up for me." And it often feels like it sums it up, right?

I mean, we have been working on homelessness in our church for 20 years and we're still dealing with homelessness. Every month we're putting out more and more meals through our Campus Kitchen program and we're still facing the same hunger. Our congregation has been in the nation's capital for 150 years, spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, and we're still in a city that is cynical and beaten down by everyday life, where people haven't heard the good news. It sometimes feel like we're doing the same thing every day and nothing makes a difference. And what I love about this picture in *Groundhog Day* is that Phil decides that even though it's going to be exactly the same thing every day, he's going to make it better. He's going to engage his job better. He's going to fine tune his skills. He's going to bring his very best self to the work that he's doing.

The next thing that Phil does that I think changes who he is over the course of this film is he figures out what are some of the things that he can do that feed his soul and he does them every day. He starts off his day in a coffee shop reading some of the great literature that he always wanted to read and you hear him later on in the movie quoting Chekhov and other folks. He starts to develop an appreciation for poetry. He learns how to play the piano and over the course of the movie becomes a phenomenal pianist. He learns ice sculpting. Well, that wouldn't appeal to me but what's important is he's figured out how to feed his soul in the midst of this endless repetition and he engages in that with discipline every single day. That's a helpful word for us too I think because in the midst of our dailiness, it is very easy to push aside the things that feed our soul because they're usually not the most critical crisis in front of us. And what Phil has figured out is that if he's going to survive and thrive in this endless repetition, he's got to figure out how to feed his soul in the midst of what he's doing, and he does that.

And then, of course, all of that contributes to Phil's growing ability to engage the people around him in loving action. When Phil first comes to Punxsutawney, he's incredibly dismissive and critical of the people in the town. On the first morning that he comes to Gobbler's Knob to see the groundhog, Rita's talking about how wonderful all the people are and they've been singing and dancing and warming themselves by the fire and he looks at her and he says, "Well, yes, Rita, they're hicks. This is what they do." He's just very, very condescending. But what happens over the course of the movie is he starts to know each of those people. He knows their names, he knows their histories, and he starts to reach out to them because he's engaged with them. He is helping them fix their tires. He's catching the boy who falls out of the tree. He's counseling the couple who's nervous about getting married. He's found all of these places where he knows and loves these people and has figured out how to share that love, and in that process of course becomes more loving and loved himself.

Earlier in the film when he's trying to woo Rita, she says, "I could never love somebody like you, Phil, because you only love yourself." And in a wonderful moment of clarity, Bill Murray says, "That's not true." He says, "I don't even like myself." And he doesn't. Because when you're of that kind of character, it's easy not to like yourself, but what happens as he starts to engage the people around him is he starts to love them and love himself and all of that culminates in the last day when Rita falls in love with him.

IV. Conclusion.

Political scientist and author, Charles Murray, has said on more than one occasion that *Groundhog Day* is one of the few cultural achievements of recent times that will be remembered centuries from now. Well, that may be strongly stated. But it is a wonderful, powerful invitation for us to live in the moment that we are given. This is what our gospel lesson is about.

Jesus reminds his disciples and us that we spend so much of our time living in the future, hoping for a different future, wishing for something new to happen that we miss where God is present in this day, in this moment, with these people that I am engaged with, and that this is where heaven starts to happen. It's not when I find the perfect day or the perfect job or the perfect community of people. It's when I realize this is where I am and this is where God is at work right now, then my life starts to change.

So, *Groundhog Day* invites us to make today that day. What if this was the day that was repeated endlessly for you? How would you want to live it? How would you engage the people around you? How would you feed your soul? How would you make it so that this is the day where you meet God?

Amen.