

**March 15, 2017**

**Sermon: *Groundhog Day—Futility and Faith***

(With thanks to Robert Jewitt, *Saint Paul Returns to the Movies*, for his reflections which prompted and guided this sermon series.)

**Texts: Ephesians 4:17-24, Galatians 6:16-26**

**Pastor Clay Oglesbee**

Ever wake up and say, “Oh, God, no, not again!” In the movie *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray plays a television weatherman named Phil Connors. At first, we only know that he is stuck for the fourth year in a row on the same television assignment in Punxatawny, Pennsylvania, cynically and contemptuously watching the same groundhog come out of the same hole to signal whether winter will ever end. He views the people around him as boring losers and himself as the single, interesting character in his whole life—yet even he is frustrated by getting nowhere—a life with no growth, completion or fulfillment.

As the movie unfolds, we also learn right along with Phil that his predicament is even deeper than he thought. He somehow gets locked inside *Groundhog Day* in Punxatawny. He cannot escape *Groundhog Day*. Phil shatters the clocks, one day at a time, over and over again, because he somehow “gets stuck in time”, futilely repeating the same day over and over and over again, *always* waking at 6:00 A.M., *always* to the sound of Sonny and Cher singing, “I Got You Babe”. Like Sisyphus, he must face the same people, events and

challenges, and personal limitations, over and over and over. He is the only one in his world who realizes that he is stranded endlessly rehearsing the same day.

I guess the joke and the hook for us is that many of us have at one time or another felt the same way about our daily rounds and duties. We *feel* trapped, whether we actually are or not, and we notice, there is plenty of labor and repetition going on, but not much deep fulfillment, not much confidence about the direction our lives are taking. Thoreau called these “lives of quiet desperation”. Sartre referred to it as “La Nausee”, the nausea of repetition and ordinariness. William Saroyan has a character say for contemporary people, “Every day has twenty-four hours...Out of the twenty-four hours at least twenty-three and a half are—my God, I don’t know why, not time of living...but spent in waiting....That goes on for days and days and weeks and months and years and years, and the first thing you know, all the years are dead.”

Why is this so? How does it happen that in the midst of our lives, we sometimes suddenly get dejected with it all? That’s what the movie is really about! It’s also what Saint Paul was getting at when he said that many of us are continually committing our energies to “sowing to the flesh” and “alienated from life”, and so we “reap the corruption” of life: by which he meant, not just moral corruption, but the repetitive cycles of futile activity that finally just yields an emptiness.

Paul is referring partly to particular moral failures in our lives, but more fundamentally to the oppressive sense of pointless tedium that can overshadow our days. Following Paul's thought, the monastics of the Middle Ages identified a sin we seldom talk about today as being just as destructive as lust, greed, or gluttony. It was what they called *acedia*, which meant "failing to care," dejection.

*Groundhog Day* is basically a sensitive and humorous exploration of this sin, this *acedia*, which leads Phil to other sins. It is the same anxious sense of the purposelessness of time that Paul explores in the text we read in the letter to the Galatians and Ephesians today.

Robert Jewitt, a New Testament scholar at Garrett Theological Seminary, says, "In the last fifty years scholars have made much of two Greek words for time found in the New Testament: *chronos*, meaning linear time...and *kairos*, meaning the "appointed time or the "time for decision". The standard Greek term for cyclical time was *chronos*, with the same hour appearing each day, moving as relentlessly and "chronically" as Phil Connor's schedule—waking with the same six o'clock alarm every morning and going through the same routine each day....potentially endless repetition, just for its own sake. This is *chronos* in its most painful form."

Paul bonds the *Christian's* life with the other term; in the Galatians text the term used is *kairos*, *significant* time or fulfilled time. So, Christ is the one who brings in this new time; redemption through Christ and freedom in the Spirit removes believers from the old treadmill of *chronos*, and places them in a present moment that is overflowing with possibility, significance and meaning because it is lived in the light of what God's has done for us: "At the right time Christ died for the ungodly". ... "be renewed in the spirit of your minds."

Phil (and we) is only truly trapped if, as Lance Webb once wrote, we are unable to stop "waiting, waiting, waiting for the dream-ship of our ego-image to come in, (because) it never quite does." You could say that the whole film, *Groundhog Day*, while a comedy, is even more a *suspense* movie where we wonder if Phil Connors (and all of us!) will ever recover from *acedia*, from engrossment with our own egos!

Phil, though captured by the deceptions and dejections of *chronos*, listens hungrily to his friend, Rita when she remarks to him, "Maybe it's how you look at" your days that matters most. She is the voice of *kairos* hope.

After this conversation, Phil's day still locks him in the same, single, endless repetition of a 24-hour period, but we see a progression in his self-understanding. His *day* does not change, it's still always Groundhog Day, but *Phil changes*. Where he once spent every repeated day

foolishly, recklessly, rebelliously, sinfully and even suicidally, he slowly converts to love, to the life of the Spirit. As time goes by, we see him acquire the fruit of the life of the Spirit, “working for the good of all” with the time he is given.

When Phil is trapped in chronos, he at first gives a homeless beggar nothing, but then a generous tip, and then a meal, and then rescues him from freezing on a bitterly cold night, then finally grieves over the man’s death. He learns to save a boy falling from a tree over and over again, as a customary part of his day. He learns the Heimlich maneuver so he can rescue a man choking on a bit of food. He fixes a flat tire endlessly for a vulnerable older woman, and it becomes his habit of kindness. He helps a squabbling couple find a resolution to their troubles. He also learns how to truly love another human being for who she is, rather than to just trying to seduce her or force her into being what he wants her to be to him.

Just as he learns, practices and masters the skills needed to play a piano beautifully by faithful, daily rehearsal, so he also learns, practices and masters the abilities needed to fill a day with compassionate good works done for their own sake, knowing full well that come the next day, no one will remember his deeds, and he will simply do them all over again for the good of that day alone and for the good of the people he has

come to know, who do not really know him and who do not remember the good he does.

In the end of the day, Phil epitomizes Paul's instruction to believers: "*While we have time, let us do good to all, especially to the household of faith.*" All that Phil has is time, an apparently endless supply of it. And when he has no reason to think that this will ever change, he learns to use it well. And of course, the spell is finally lifted when Phil learns that single lesson: to love selflessly. He tells his beloved on the last night, even while he is still trapped: "No matter what happens tomorrow for the rest of my life, I'm happy now, because I love you."

So, what about each of us? Are we *awaking* to the day, this day, every day, to 6:00 A.M., complaining to ourselves, "Oh, God, no, not again!" Or have we begun to find that *in Christ* every day is filled with *kairos*, with endless opportunities to grow, learn, serve, and love?

Phil says, "No matter what happens...I am happy...because I love..."

Paul says, "I rejoice in the Lord.... (for) I have learned in whatever state I am to be content..." (Philippians 4:10, 11).