

“Light or Blight?”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
February 5, 2023 – Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

[Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37](#)

Did you see your own shadow this last Thursday? Punxsutawney Phil, the celebrity groundhog of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, *did* see his shadow when he popped out of his burrow at 7:23 a.m. at Gobbler’s Knob, telling us, but perhaps not with a scientific level of precision, that there will be six more weeks of winter. Sure enough, we were reminded over the last couple of days since Phil saw his shadow, and with a scientific level of precision, that winter is still here, as the polar vortex, a mass of cold air that usually swirls around further north (where it belongs!) dipped south and into our neck of the woods, bringing us record cold temperatures. In fact, at around 4 a.m. yesterday, at the weather station on top of Mount Washington, scientists witnessed the lowest temperature ever measured with instruments, as the negative 46 degree Fahrenheit cold air, moving at well over-100-miles-per-hour produced a wind chill of negative 108 degrees! Looks like ol’ Phil the Groundhog nailed it!

Today, however, we move into a period with much balmy weather, as we are expecting a high temperature somewhere in the mid-40s. Temperature-wise, today is certainly not going to be like yesterday. And for those of you who are not fans of the cold, you may be quietly shouting Halleluiahs to that!

Indeed, it is a good thing that today is not the same as yesterday, and not just concerning meteorological events. Today, all things are new and different than they were yesterday, or, perhaps it might be more accurate to say that all things can become new and different than they were yesterday.

Perhaps you remember the 1993 film *Groundhog Day*, starring Bill Murray, about a TV weatherman named Phil, who is sent by his Chicago TV station to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, to witness Phil the Groundhog emerging from his lair and other Groundhog Day festivities. After covering the day’s events, Phil and the crew traveling with him get stuck overnight in Pennsylvania, being unable to leave due to a blizzard. Upon waking up the next morning to a clock radio playing Sonny and Cher’s song “I Got You, Babe,” Phil learns that instead of waking up to a new day, he was waking up to Groundhog Day again, with the previous day’s

events playing over. And this happened the next day and the next, with each morning beginning with “I Got You, Babe” and the events of day being the same as the last. Phil tries to break free from being trapped in this cycle, but no matter what he does, no matter what happens to him, he wakes up the next day to Sonny and Cher and Punxsutawney Phil.

At first, Phil uses this unbreakable cycle and the absence of having any lasting consequences to his actions to his advantage. He robs an armored car and then robs Phil the Groundhog, tries to seduce women, and feasts like a glutton. But he finds no meaning or happiness in acting like a jerk or satisfying his every desire, and he finds himself waking up each morning to relive Groundhog Day in misery.

All the while, he tries to gain the love of his co-worker Rita, played by Andie MacDowell. But no matter what he tries, day after day, he’s unable to do so. In one scene, Rita tells Phil, “I could never love someone like you. You only love yourself.” To which Phil replies, “That’s not true. I don’t even like myself.”

The conversation sparked something in Phil, and he realized that he should use his energies in every recycling day to learn to like himself and to love others. And so he learns to play the piano and speak French, does work to serve others, and tries to develop many of the characteristics that we read about in last Sunday’s scripture lessons from the prophet Micah and the Beatitudes, and he finds happiness and meaning in doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly. Day by day, with each day being the same as the last and yet one full of new possibilities for doing good and becoming a better person, Phil ends up winning the heart of Rita and breaking free from the cycle.

The message of this film echoes so many of the teachings of our different religious traditions, and we can see in it a parable that reminds us of important truths to embrace as we live our own lives. While each new day may seem like the last, and it may resemble the last, we are not stuck doing what we did yesterday in this new moment. We can use our energies today in new ways to do what is right and good, to be a blessing to the world and ourselves, and break free from a miserable existence to one that is blessed with meaning.

With each new day, we can allow in our lives through our own practice of doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God, more of God’s light. And by taking in more of God’s light, we can shine more of God’s light upon the world. As

Jesus tells us in today's gospel lesson from the Sermon on the Mount, we can be like a lamp on a stand that casts light for others. God's light shining in us and through us can be as obvious, Jesus says, as a "city on a hill," which can't be missed, even from far away.

Being a "city on a hill" was very important to our spiritual ancestors here in New England. The Puritans who streamed from England to the area where we now live and the generations who followed them, some of whom formed our congregation almost 300 years ago, saw themselves as a unique "city on a hill," a civilization that was loftier than all others before it or around it because it was one that sought to be led not merely by people, but by God and the Bible's teachings. Indeed, there were many aspects of their communities that were light-filled, light-shedding, and admirable, such as their democratic ideals, love of literacy, and desire for all children to be educated (primarily so that they could read the Bible and learn how to turn from their sinful ways to the good ones the Bible prescribes). However, there was much in their "city on a hill" that was uncivilized and evil, and too often their actions cast darkness upon themselves and those around them. The New England Puritans continued the European traditions of taking the territory from others and claiming it as their own, making war against their neighbors, enslaving others, and prosecuting and executing those who were different, disliked, or dissenters as practitioners of witchcraft (which, it should be noted, was not just a practice in Salem, Massachusetts, and earlier in Hartford, Connecticut; in the years before the witch trials of Hartford and Salem, many thousands of people in Europe were tortured and/or killed after being labeled as sorcerers or witches).

But thank God today is a new day and we do not have to be trapped, reliving all the ways of our ancestors. Here in this old sanctuary, we can become a "city on a hill" in the way Jesus envisioned in his Beatitudes. We can become a community that is blessed because it is merciful, peaceful, and humble. We can spread light, not blight, by serving one another and the world, and we can show the world that the way of selfless love brings light that displaces darkness. There is hope that we can work towards the creation a more just world for all people, especially those who are disadvantaged today because of the evils of yesterday. May God's light shine on us, in us, and through us. Amen.