

The Days of our Lives

sermon digest

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Genesis 1:1-2:3

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A couple of years ago the 1993 movie “Groundhog Day” was added to the National Film Registry for its popularity and cultural significance, and last year it was listed on the Internet Movie Database as the 176th most popular film in the US. The comedy is about a man stuck in time.

Bill Murray is Phil Connors, a Pittsburgh weatherman on a miserable assignment to a two-horse town to cover the annual Groundhog Day festivities. Anxious to wrap up the assignment and get home, he is surprised by the blizzard which he had assured his TV audience would not reach Pennsylvania. He is forced to spend a second night in the miserable little town. The next morning Connors awakes to the clock radio just like the day before. The date is still February 2nd. There is no snow on the ground. The radio repeats the same news he heard the day before. At breakfast he encounters the same people who repeat the exact lines. As the day unfolds every minute detail of Groundhog Day occurs again in the exact same order right down to the town festival and a repetition of the storm that forces him back to his hotel room to the same bed to awake to another repetition of February 2nd. Phil soon learns that he is the only variable in the day’s events. He is trapped in a time loop. Every day is Groundhog Day. He soon becomes familiar with every line and every act. Finally the weatherman can forecast precisely not only the weather but behavior and events of this one day. He discovers that knowledge is power. At first he uses his knowledge to manipulate people and outcomes to his advantage, but he quickly becomes bored and attempts to break the endless loop. In one scene he grabs the groundhog and runs. He ends up in a car chase that takes him over a cliff, only to wake up again to the clock radio and a repetition of the same day. Finally the pompous weatherman is humbled by his prison in time. He confides in Rita his producer. She convinces him to use his knowledge to benefit the town and to better himself. He begins to notice Rita for the first time. He falls in love and finally wakes up to the next day.

Get off the treadmill. “Groundhog Day” touches a nerve that has long held fascination for the human mind. The days of our lives can seem tedious and even boring. In the famous idiom of Yogi Berra, “It’s *deja vu* all over again.” Every day looks alike as one-by-one childhood fantasies about what you are going to be when you grow up disappear into the mist of reality. I have heard people describe their jobs as a treadmill going nowhere. Changing vocations in mid-life was not uncommon a few years ago. I have noticed colleagues in ministry who are desperate to get out, while others were leaving the world of business for seminary to prepare for a new life in Christian vocation. In the 1960’s a human interest story on the news told about a man with a new car who returned to the dealer with a complaint about a rattle in the door. The mechanics removed the panel to find a bottle with a note that read, “So you found me, you blankety-blank.” The incident proved to be a commentary on the miserable boredom of the assembly line in which the same person installed the same part over and over again all day long, every day of the week. Manufacturers found that the tedium affected quality and began to experiment with more creative ways of assembling cars.

The treadmill image of work spills over into family life. The classical mid-life crisis finds a forty-something, balding man deciding to buy a sports car, get a divorce, and look for excitement with a girl the age of his daughter. People do desperate, stupid things just to break the tedium of life.

The Greek philosophy of time prevalent in the New Testament age was cyclical. We get a taste of Platonic thought in Ecclesiastes that describes life as “vanity,” emptiness, and sounds like “Groundhog Day” in 1:9: “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.” The Greek mind perceived of Time running in bigger circles than a day, but mortals were trapped in an endless cycle, like Sisyphus doomed to push a boulder to the top of a mountain only to have it fall back to the bottom to begin again. Augustine wrote *City of God* as the Vandals sacked Rome. Weighing the prospects of Christianity in a world falling into chaos, he denounced the Greek idea that time runs in circles. Time runs in a line with every new day offering a new possibility. Time, the creation of God, has beginning and end.

Certainly the circular movement of the day and night implies a return to the same point, but every day is not the same. The silly debates over the meaning of Genesis that have revolved around the length of the days of creation miss the poetry and symmetry in the message. Walter Brueggemann describes the story as a liturgy appropriate for worship, poetry that expresses the indescribable origins of the world, and a theology of blessing that affirms the goodness of what God has made. A day, *yom*, is the most basic, most obvious, measure of our lives. One does not need special equipment or unusual insight to notice that our lives cycle through the rotation of days and nights. The sundial like the early clocks utilized the circle of a wheel to measure the flow of time. In Hebrew, like English, a day was a literal reference to a period of one’s life that moves from one dawn to the next, but it sometimes referred to an epoch or episode in life, like “in my day.” The Psalmist perceived that our measure of time cannot begin to fathom the depths of an eternal God. Psalm 90 declares: “For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday.”

In our text, the days of creation are counted one through six. Each ends with a doxology of affirmation of the goodness of the creation. The day is not measured in hours. The day of creation is defined by changing content, the evolving progress of nature. The creation, beginning with a formless void, moves each day toward a higher complexity until it reaches a climax in human life,

and God takes a break. The seven-day week around which Hebrew life revolved, from Sabbath to Sabbath, was modeled after the work of God in creation. In the creation of the world, God created time, the days of our lives; and like all of the creation, we move from beginning to end.

Life imitates faith. No doubt we humans are capable of wishful thinking and are prone to denial of the unpleasant realities of life. Like a child's game of "let's pretend," we are makers of myths in search of an anesthetic to avoid the painful realities of normal life. How many times have I heard *and said* about a terminally ill friend, "I wish she could just die quietly and peacefully in her sleep." The controversial "Physician-assisted Suicide" law in Oregon, now being considered in Washington State, is certainly based on a humane desire to avoid physical and mental anguish associated with illness, the ultimate narcotic. The only problem is our limited ability to determine the end or predict the balance of pain with meaning in life. Modern medicine is now facing realities that doctors wanted to deny a few decades ago, that life moves toward an unavoidable end for which medicine eventually offers no cure. I recall the story of a hospital chaplain in St. Louis forty years ago. The lady was dying with cancer and wanted to talk with the chaplain about the end of life. Her doctor discovered the conversation and quickly had her transferred to another hospital without a chaplain. I suppose that he harbored a myth that modern medicine, primitive by today's standard, could create Groundhog Day.

Yes, the creation stories in Genesis seem strange if one is looking in the Bible for scientific explanations of the origin of the universe and the rationale for the unique character of human life, but they are not strange to someone who is asking questions of faith. Is this life a miserable, hopeless cycle that revolves around nothing? Is the linear movement of history from beginning to end a move toward an abyss of nothingness? Do we come from nowhere and go to nowhere? The Hebrew faith saw life moving like creation from a chaotic abyss to the celebration of Sabbath, and faith, then and now, has a way of shaping reality. Some see life imitating art, while others see life imitating faith.