

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
February 2, 2014, Presentation & Candlemas
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell

Text – Luke 2:

These past few mornings have been rather unusual. Each day begins with the alarm going off – the same time, the same tune each day. Fifteen minutes later, the second alarm sounds – a different tune, but the same each day. I grudgingly roll out of bed and peer out the window at the driveway that, last night, was plowed and clear. But now, again, it and my car are coated with another layer of snow!

Oh, no! I am living “Ground Hog’s Day!” The movie.

Just a short time ago, the word arrived from Punxsutawny, PA. At 6:28 am our time, Phil ground hog did see his shadow, thus predicting 6 more weeks of winter. Well, never mind. It appears that the accuracy rate is only about 37%.

This year, there is an interesting confluence of observances, events, holidays, and church (and pagan) feasts and festivals all on one day. And if we add just another couple days, there are more. In addition to Ground Hogs’ Day and The Presentation in the Temple/Candlemas that always happen on February 2, this year we have the Super Bowl. And yesterday, St. Brigid’s (or Bride’s) Day, just after the lunar Chinese New Year that was on January 31.

Some 20,000 people waited long before dawn in the 38 degree rain for a furry beast to emerge. Tonight many more thousands will watch burly guys in colorful outfits run up and down throwing or kicking an odd-shaped ball trying to get it across a line at the end of the field. The crowd will cheer and maybe join in odd rituals like the wave.

And then, here we are, marching around with lighted candles, singing and praying about events that happened more than 2,000 years ago.

I have been thinking a lot about ritual and ceremony recently. That’s not unusual – it’s a big part of my job to do that. Much of it is involved in planning our liturgies here at Grace Church. But there is also keeping up with the continuing barrage of advice about how we should change things to attract more people and to stop the outward flow of people from our churches. There are those who recommend what many consider “dumbing down.” And there are those advising the opposite – “go higher” they say, more ceremonial, more incense, more grand vestments. Example: two Facebook groups that I follow from time to time: One is called “Actually young people do like traditional liturgy.” Posters on this page tend to be a bit on the smug side, quoting pre-Reformation history and insisting on “their” way. The other group, “Things they didn’t teach me in seminary” has occasional discussions on

worship practices, debating such things as whether it's okay to allow the family dog to be a ring bearer in a wedding or a memorial service begin with the Michigan fight song. It's true.

And then, there's the Washington Post report this past week complete with statistics of decreases in people who claim a church affiliation alongside numbers that go in the opposite direction for sports. The authors wonder whether sports are becoming the religion of the American people.

Then there are the people who insist that church liturgy is boring. I had dinner a week ago with old friends. The husband grew up in a large Roman Catholic family and continues to go to mass every Sunday. His wife, whose childhood church was Protestant, does not go. She says it is just repetition. Just repeating the same old things – standing, sitting, kneeling. He does not disagree with her.

Is that all it is? Maybe the difference is that you don't know the outcome of a football game. Well, you do. One team or the other will get that ball where it belongs more than the other.

I believe that there is something fundamental about our human condition that wires us toward ritual and ceremony, as varied as it might be. It provides a kind of container for meaning, I think. A container that is communal, bringing us together with others to celebrate in a common language of voice and movement. And usually repeats year after year. Whether you think that makes it boring depends on how you approach it. And, maybe, how much of yourself you put into it.

That repeating pattern in the church, of course, is the liturgical year. And our feast today, the combination of the Presentation and Candlemas brings to an end the season of Christmas, or perhaps more accurately, the season of the birth narrative of Jesus that began with Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem where the birth took place, and ends 40 days later when the child is presented and the mother is purified. With the exception of one brief story of Jesus in the Temple at the age of 12, this is all that the Bible has to say about the child Jesus.

The constant theme that runs through this feast is light. It is continuation of that theme that began in Advent with the prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures that anticipated the birth, promising a light to bring the people out of darkness. There was the star at the birth, the star that led the magi on their way to Bethlehem. Now, the old man, Simeon, who was given a promise that he would see the Messiah before he died, echoes those ancient prophets as he sings his song of this light that has come, "a light to enlighten the nations, and the glory of your people Israel."

And, there is the light of lengthening days that combines the Christian celebrations with those of older cultures – the Celtic and the Roman. Though the Presentation is one of the oldest of Christian feasts, having been practiced since the 4th century, it was several hundred years more before Candlemas was added. It is possible that, as with other pagan celebrations, the church intentionally adopted Candlemas, shifting the focus and meaning of the light. The Presentation and Candlemas fall exactly midway between the winter solstice

and the spring equinox. The light has now shown progress over the long winter nights. We see it, don't we when the sun is setting well after 5 PM? So, it signaled the time to begin to prepare for the planting season, moving the livestock from the fields that will be planted. Clearing away the dead undergrowth to allow new shoots to grow. The Christians simply lighted the candles as symbols of the light of Christ. In Eastern churches the year's supply of candles is blessed, and the light is spread. New life comes through Christ.

But the connection to the earth remains. There is even a connection to Ground Hog's Day!

From Scotland: If Candlemas Day is bright and clear
 There'll be two winters in the year.

From England: If Candlemas be fair and bright,
 Winter has another flight.

No, ritual and ceremonial is not boring. We are reminded of stories of our faith as they cycle around year after year with our music, the colors of our vestments, our prayers, and our special liturgies. Rather than seeing them as repetitive, rather than "going through the motions," we are invited to experience them not only in our minds, but in our bodies and senses – using our voices as we sing and pray, our arms and legs as we kneel or process forward to the altar, our mouths and our taste as we receive the bread and the wine, our souls as we lean into God's presence, our whole selves as we are a part of the body of Christ all together in this place.

Maybe we need to prepare before we come to church. We prepare for the Super Bowl and the Stanley Cup – looking over statistics, who's injured, who's in the starting line up. We prepare at plays and operas and symphonies, if only by reading the program notes so that we know what to look for and how to listen. The musicians rehearse throughout the week. The preacher and electors practice their delivery. The altar party goes over its movement. But they are not performers in worship. They are participants. Those of you in the pews are not an audience. You, too, are participants. We can read our weekly scriptures ahead of time and reflect on them. We can take time within worship to be silent, to let words of prayers and hymns sink in as we offer all that we are and all that we do to the only audience, God.

Unlike in the movie "Ground Hog's Day," we need not repeat the day over and over again until we get it right. If we come prepared to worship God with our whole selves, it will be right.

Amen.