

Known In The Womb

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,
“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD!

Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’;
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you,

Do not be afraid of them,

for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.”

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth;
and the LORD said to me,

“Now I have put my words in your mouth.

See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

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Jeremiah 1:4-10

February 2, 2025

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I.

My friends, we have much to do and not much time in which to do it. Today, following the worship service, is our Annual Meeting of the Congregation. Being the first Sunday of the month, today we are also celebrating Communion to which everyone is invited, and in which all are welcome to share. Today is also Groundhog Day, which in recent generations has become something of a “campy” occasion with the advent of Punxsutawney Phil and, of course, the very funny 1993 movie “Groundhog Day” starring Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell, but is actually a “Cross Quarter Day” also known as the Feast Day “Candlemas” with ancient pagan roots tied to celestial and terrestrial rhythms. And, today our sermon text comes to us from the Book of Jeremiah, who was a “Major” prophet living in the Kingdom of Judah in the late 7th and early 6th centuries BCE. As I said, we have much to do and not much time in which to do it.

II.

Known as the “weeping prophet,” Jeremiah is purported to have written the eponymous book (which bears his name) as well as Kings and Lamentations. Born into a priestly lineage, Jeremiah only reluctantly accepted the call to prophethood, embarking on a tumultuous ministry lasting over five decades. His life was marked by opposition, imprisonment, and personal struggles (hence the weeping). Central to Jeremiah's message were prophecies of impending divine judgment, forewarning of the nation's idolatry, social injustices, and moral decay. Jeremiah's teachings encompassed lamentations, oracles, and symbolic acts, all of which emphasized the urgency of repentance and the restoration of a covenant relationship with God. He prophesied the siege of Jerusalem and Babylonian captivity as consequences for disobedience. Which is pretty much what came to pass. However, all of this was yet to come. Our passage from today, from Jeremiah 1, tells the tale of how this long journey began. Which is where we, ourselves, will begin today.

III.

Scripture tells us that Jeremiah was 17 years old when he was first called to speak God's truth to the religious and political power of his day. Which, in the Hebrew Scriptures, is the function of a prophet. Though the role is usually associated with prognostication, dream interpretation, and the reading of signs and omens, the real work of the prophet was to remind people of the covenantal promises they had made both to God and themselves, and to call the people to repent, or make a change, from waywardness in the form of idolatry, moral decay and, in particular, social injustices; especially in the way the poor and powerless were being treated in society.

In other words, it was no picnic to be called to serve as God's prophetic voice in the world. Hence, it is quite understandable to see Jeremiah's reluctance and reservations evidenced in today's text: "*Ah, Lord GOD!*" Says Jeremiah, "*Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.*"

IV.

Which, if you think about it, is a fairly funny thing to say to God. Of course God *knows* his age but, moreover, God *knows* Jeremiah's abilities. If God didn't think Jeremiah would be up to task, such a conversation would not be taking place. God replies:

"Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, do not be afraid, for I am with you to deliver you."

And God put out his hand and touched Jeremiah's mouth saying:

"Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

Certainly, hearing this from the mouth of God must have surely been sufficient to not only assure Jeremiah, but to gird his metaphorical loins as well. Moreover, this instance is a reminder that when *calls* us to a task God also sufficiently *equips* us to *accomplish* that task. It is not we who speak or act, it is God who speaking or acting *through* us. In this there is much solace and strength.

V.

While all of this is certainly impressive, not to mention persuasive, the most intriguing part of this interaction between God and Jeremiah is the preamble:

We read, “*Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’*”

That, right there, is a bold epistemological statement on the nature of God. One we should not let pass us by without closer examination and scrutiny.

Epistemology is the philosophical study of knowledge, and explores the essential character and characteristics of knowledge, how knowledge is created, and the limits of that knowledge. Every epistemological inquiry asks three distinguishing questions:

- What does it mean to know something?
- How is knowledge created through perception, inquiry, and/or testimony?
- What are the limits of that knowledge?

To better understand what God says to Jeremiah we are going to use the lens of Groundhog Day. Yes, you heard me/read correctly, Groundhog Day.

VI.

Apparently, the tradition of having a rodent predict (or, if you like, prophecy) the duration of winter was carried to this county from the successive waves of German immigrants in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. These were Amish, Mennonite, Lutheran, German Reformed, and Moravian groups fleeing religious persecution to settle in the historically tolerant state of Pennsylvania; especially in, and around, Lancaster County. The descendants of these folks are known as Pennsylvania Dutch, with the word for German, “Deutsche,” becoming “Dutch” over time.

In their cultural tradition, the groundhog emerges from hibernation on February 2nd to seek its shadow. A sunny day allowing the groundhog to see a shadow portends six more weeks of winter, while a cloudy day yielding no shadow is a harbinger of an early spring. While the first recorded observation of Groundhog Day in this county took place in 1840, the origins of the practice are much more ancient and rooted in celestial and terrestrial rhythms.

VII.

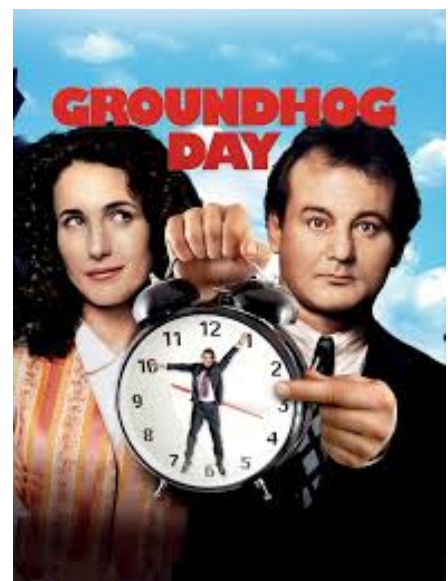
If you do the math, you will find that Groundhog Day falls halfway between the Winter Solstice and the Vernal Equinox (which along with the Summer Solstice and Autumnal Equinox are “Quarter Days.”). Groundhog Day, then, is a “Cross-Quarter Day,” along with *Beltane*/May Day (May 1st) when sown fields begin to sprout up; *Lammass* (Aug. 1st) from the Old English for “loaf mass,” which celebrates the wheat harvest; and, *Samhain* (October 31st) or “summer’s end” which we observe as Halloween/All Saints’ Day.

Long before it was Groundhog Day, February 2nd was known as *Imbolc* (meaning, “lambs’ milk”) as it signaled the onset of the lambing season, as well as the point in the year to estimate how soon spring-like weather will come so as to determine when to plant the crops. Hence, the Groundhog and her predictive shadow. Later, the same date would find Christian churches lighting candles to signal the presentation of the Christ Child in the temple of Jerusalem as a light unto the world, and celebrating the occasion as a Feast Day known as “Candlemas.”

VIII.

In fact, just about every significant occasion in the ecclesiastical year is tied to ancient agricultural rhythms upon which terrestrial beings have always depended, and to the movement of celestial bodies (sun and planets) to which we have long oriented ourselves. These are the ways in which we humans have always endeavored to understand our place in the world, as well as the movement of this world through time. Or, said another way, how we humans have come to *know*; our epistemology, if you will. Ecclesiastes 3:1: “*To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.*”

That said, the kind of knowing expressed by God in Jeremiah 1 is different and distinct. To understand this form of knowing (epistemology) we turn once again to Groundhog Day. Though in this instance, the movie rather than the occasion. Fair disclosure: I am a *huge* Bill Murray fan. From SNL (“Who wants a noogie?”), to *Stripes* (“Convicted?”), to *Ghost Busters* (“Back off man, I’m a scientist”) the guy cracks me up just looking at him.



IX.

If you have never seen the movie, a comedic love story, I would commend it to you. Linda and I rewatched it on Thursday (counts as sermon prep) and beyond being free of any serious adult language or content (rated PG), it is actually *funny*. You *will* laugh.

The plot finds Bill Murray playing the role of a rather self-absorbed weatherman at a Pittsburgh TV station who only begrudgingly goes to Punxsutawney to cover Phil's big day. Along with him is a new producer, and eventual love interest, played by the very wonderful Andie McDowell. However, Murray's character gets stuck in a time loop where he wakes up every morning at 6 a.m. to re-live the same Groundhog Day over and over again. Beyond the ensuing comic relief, with all the new found time on his hands Murray embarks on a journey of self-discovery and self-improvement to become a rather endearing and kind human being. When Andie MacDowell eventually falls in love with the new and revamped Bill Murray, he is freed from the time loop to give a happy ending to the story.

X.

Mid-way through the movie is the [diner scene](#) which finds Murray trying to explain to MacDowell what has been happening to him. He wonders if he is "a" God (not "the" God) and says, "*Maybe the real God uses tricks. Maybe he's not omnipotent, he's just been around so long he knows everything.*" While it may not be a very consequential line in the movie's script, the theological importance of which is missed by most I'm sure, it is actually a highly insightful epistemological distinction.

Human beings come to know the world, each other, and ourselves through experience, education, and instinct, with this "knowing" being accumulated, carried over, and passed on to succeeding generations, cultures, and civilizations across the span of tens of thousands of year. It is how we have come to know and understand the march of seasons in the natural world, the paths of heavenly bodies as they move across the skies, and it is how we mark our journey through this life. This epistemological process is how *we* know how to make fire, plant crops, care for our young, treat disease and, perhaps, predict winter's end.

XI.

However, the epistemological process by which *God* comes to know is very different. Or so we have gleaned, or so we imagine, or so we hope. God's knowing is not a function of time, place, space, or experience. Instead, as the One who creates all that is, was, and will ever be, there is no limit to God's knowing or what might be known. As was the case with Jeremiah, before God formed us in the womb God *knew* us, and before we were born God consecrated us, and God has appointed *each* of us with purpose and has sufficiently equipped us to fulfill that purpose which, like Jeremiah, is divinely ordered and ordained. The challenge is to discover and to believe this to be the case, and to come to *know* this truth as our own. Just as Jeremiah once did. Oh, we may not be called to speak God's truth to the world's power, but every single one of us has been called to make a change, both in ourselves and in our own small corner of this world. We are to be God's prophetic voice; especially, in the treatment of the poor and powerless.

XII.

I would like to end today with two stories, each of an epistemological nature. I am sure, by now, you are all aware that our daughter, Nicole, and Sarah and Duncan's son, Chris, are expecting their first child any day now (though the Due Date has been pushed back a week to February 14th). The other day Nicole shared with Linda her recent experience of a gentle, rhythmic bounce emanating from the child within her womb, and that she immediately *knew* what it was: the baby had the hiccups.

You may also be aware that my mother, Nancy, recently came under the care of Hospice after living for ten years following a catastrophic stroke at age 70, and just 2 months after having retired. Recently, my brother, Jack, was visiting her. Though the stroke took her ability to speak, and she is increasingly disinclined to communicate at all, amid the tears of my brother's visit she kept lifting her arm and pointing up to the sky. She *knows* where she is going.

XIII.

Both of these stories make my heart ache, for different reasons which are strangely the same. That each of these two moments, the birth of a first grandchild and the death of one's mother, should be occurring at the same

time is enough of a burning bush for me to recognize and appreciate the rhythm of life repeating itself once more, and to come see God's hand at work both in the world and in my own life.

While I grieve that my mother will never hold this great-grandchild of hers, I am comforted that this child will come to know great-grandma Nancy through the life and love she gave as a gifts to me and my family, to our daughter and her husband and, now, to this child of God hiccuping in her mother's womb. Such is the gift of this life God has given to each one of us. My friends, we have much to do and not much time in which to do it. Amen.