

To an Unknown God

Acts 17:22-28

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“For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you... (Acts 17:23).”

You know, as nonsensical as it first may seem, every time I read this passage I just can’t prevent my brain from conjuring an image of this guy... [Bill Murray in the movie “Groundhog Day”]

Yes, even if it’s just for a nanosecond he always somehow appears. In all of his grumpy glory.

I think it has something to do with that scene of revelation with the beautiful Andie McDowell, with Rita [her character] in the diner, where Bill, or more precisely now Phil -- Phil Connors -- goes on a monologue in where he self-discovers and proudly announces that he is in fact God. Well, maybe not *that* God. *The* God. But, a god nonetheless.

And really who at this point in the movie can even doubt him? After all, he has died and come back to life so many times, that he at least resembles what we often first think of as supernatural. But it’s not only the dying and rising, you see. Through living the same day on endless recycle, he also now knows everyone in town, once virtual strangers, by name. He knows their very routines. The steps they will take. The places they will be. The accidents that will befall them. The fates that will seal them. He knows it all even if he can’t accurately predict the weather. Because in that endless loop that he has found himself in, he has lived it all. So many times. Each and every day. Repeat after repeat on repeat.

And though the analogy, I admit, is a bit too on the nose for these times, these days where we all begin with the same alarming nauseating refrain -- “Then put your little hand in mine...Rise and Shine Campers” -- I must say that the totality of this Groundhog Day movie still offers us a surprisingly deep moral lesson in how we as humans – God’s very offspring, so we’ve heard -- can achieve so little when we only ever think of ourselves. When we get lost in the reeds of that Me-first and I-Got-Mine mentality. Yes, a bit on the nose indeed.

You see, Phil, god or not, has to learn that the end doesn’t always justify the means. In fact, it rarely, if ever does. And more, if the means themselves are only justified by the ending, well, than that too is rife with flaws. ...A return to live worship, for instance, as lovely as it would be, but built on the graves of our most vulnerable; well, I’m just not sure that end is justified... And so, in order to get the girl, to achieve his desired outcome and win Rita’s affections, Phil Connors needs to learn how to change. That it’s not about himself or his personal litany of individualized, remembered, or embellished accomplishments, nor is it even about getting the order or timing just right. No, Phil has to learn what we all have had to learn in these days of endless loops, that the true reward can only be grasped when the focus shifts off of ourselves, off of our own selfish wants and desires, and is recalibrated to also consider the needs of the whole, of everyone else living in our communities. So, doing rightly then for the moral sake of simply doing rightly. Not, for instance, saving the old man or fixing the lady’s flat tires because Rita might notice. But saving the old man and fixing the lady’s tires because that is just the right and altruistic thing to do. It is only then when Phil sheds his

narcissism, and begins to act for others by looking sympathetically upon their needs, that he truly becomes like an offspring of God and finally emerges to encounter a new day.

Our Scriptures this morning declare that: “Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. Indeed, God is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being, as we too are his offspring. They then who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

In the 93-total pages of Faith Statements that this amazing, beautiful Confirmation Class submitted, this was their most overarching summation: that what was the point of an assured faith if it yet lacked the conviction to live it rightly in communion with others? After all, Jesus gave us but two commandments. To love God and to love your neighbor.

And so here, not at the end but at the middle, I proclaim to you that the unknown God in these rather unknown times is not Phil Connors, but the One who formed the heavens and the earth, and the same One who abides right now, right there within. Within each of you. God’s very offspring: diverse, other, and wonderful. And so, it is precisely in loving your neighbor, in loving each other, in even loving yourself, that you are then loving and revealing the God who, though maybe unknowable and wholly other to you yet, loves you and is with you both now and forever more.

--- Interlude: “If You Love Me” (Thomas Tallis) ---

*If ye love me, keep my commandments.
And I will pray the Father,
And he shall give you another comforter,
That he may abide with you forever;
E’en the spirit of truth.*

If God abides within us than surely God knows us and can sympathize with us. As God came down to share our human condition in Christ, such to know pain and temptation, sorrow and death, God then intimately understands just what it’s like to now suffer in these times. For if the Coronavirus and lockdown has taught us anything, it is truly that parents and children suffer and do all things now jointly together.

God knows then this mire that we walk in. This uncertainty, this fear, this doubt, and all this trembling. God knows in and with 2020 clarity that it can feel like we won’t ever get to tomorrow. To a land and a nation we were promised, or even just a time when everything is ordered and returned to normal. And yet, like times of old, God has not abandoned us. For by God’s ever giving and ever present Spirit, ever illuminating and ever inspiring, every day we get glimpses. Mosaic pieces scattered about that suggest a fuller, more beautiful picture still here and yet to come.

Honestly I see them already in our friends down at West Kensington, where Pastor Adan nearly every day is out on the street handing out food and supplies to those who have need. I see these mosaics at Wayne Pres where Pastor Casey creates stop-motion shorts to disseminate the Biblical

story for children's understanding. I see them at East Falls where Pastor Kari runs a one-woman show as if she had an army of ten. And I find them in our youth, who no matter their whiplash have kept their wits, their humor, their faith. I see them in our children who with Austin's help illustrate cards of hope and color to our homebound. I hear them in voices, like our own Bill Ashmead, who can still crack two jokes for every minute on the phone with me.

And so, as much of a struggle as it is, my friends, we need to try to pick up these pieces and all those like it, assembling them into a greater whole. But not the whole or the picture that once was, but a new picture. A new normal. A radical reordering of community and society where minimum pay is raised, and all health procured. Where the hungry are fed, and the naked clothed. Where the truth still matters and leaders actually govern. Where even the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness remembers its non-exclusive club-status and open enrollment.

And I think we can get there. In time. And it's going to take time. But in the meantime, let us try to see the light. To champion and parrot some good news. Even the small things. Like sunny days and bike rides. Mother's Day and flower deliveries. Large circles and a couple of cold ones put back. Like all this family time, and board games, and yes, even maybe zoom reunions and weddings.

It's naïve. And breezy. And even, strangely, light for me. But you know what. We can all do with a little less substance these days. And a lot more lightness and beauty. And a lot less ugly.

So, I guess, if possible, if we are able, let us try to rise each of these long, endless, repeating mornings by dedicating the day, or even just a moment, to finding love in action and thus God there abiding within, within all of us, God's very offspring.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.