

Well, it's February. And one of the ways we know this is because, last week, we engaged in our strange annual ritual of pulling a rodent from a hole and asking it to predict the weather.

I'm referring to Groundhog Day, of course. February 2nd. As the folklore goes, if the groundhog emerges from its home and sees his shadow, it means six more weeks of winter for all of us.

If you think about it, Groundhog Day is all about one question: is there light or isn't there? Whether or not the groundhog sees its shadow depends entirely upon whether the sun is shining. Which, actually, is probably how the whole holiday got started.

You see, February 2nd is also a holiday that the church has recognized for centuries, called Candlemas. February 2nd is 40 days after Christmas, which is when Mary, following Jewish law, would have taken Jesus to the temple to be presented.

Luke's gospel tells the story. When Mary takes the 40-day old Jesus to be blessed on that first groundhog day—February 2nd—an old man named Simeon sees the baby and immediately recognizes Jesus for who he is.

Simeon takes the baby in his arms and says, "Lord, you may now let me die in peace, for my eyes have now seen your salvation that you have prepared for all peoples: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for the glory of your people Israel." (Luke 2:29-32)

Jesus is the light of the world. A light that has come to shine God's promises of love and of peace upon us all.

So that's the good news. Jesus is the light of the world and has come into this world for you, for me, and for all people.

The bad news? Well, this groundhog day (Thursday), our nation's most authoritative groundhog in Punxsatawney, Pennsylvania saw his shadow, which means no early spring this year. It's six more long weeks of winter.

And I suppose this is really the challenge for all of us. As we confess the truth of the light of Christ that has come into the world, it can feel as though winter just keeps getting longer and longer, like the cold and gloom might never end. Our own despair and fear, and feelings of meaninglessness, may threaten to overshadow us.

I actually rewatched one of my favorite movies this past week. It's called "Groundhog Day." And it tells the story of a weatherman named Phil who travels to Punxsatawney, Pennsylvania to provide local news coverage of the big groundhog event. Phil is a

conceited, self-centered man who cares only for himself, who mercilessly mocks the people of this small town, and who can't wait to leave once he files his news report.

But then, the next morning, Phil wakes up in Punxatawney only to discover that he has to relive the same Groundhog Day all over again. And then he does it again and again and again. By some cruel magic, Phil is doomed to repeat the same Groundhog Day in Punxatawney hundreds—if not thousands—of times.

In one scene, after finally accepting his fate, Phil turns to a man who is sitting next to him at the bar. He asks, "What would you do if you were stuck in one place and every day was exactly the same, and nothing you did mattered?"

"That about sums up life for me," the man replies.

So Phil, stuck forever in a world where it feels as though nothing matters, he becomes depressed. He despairs. He passes by people on the street in need of help. He is cruel to others. He is living a question that so many of us might ask on our worst days, "so what's the point of this?"

Especially in the climate we live in today, it feels as though contentiousness and discord and fear hang in the air over just about anything. It feels as though the social fabric of our life together is being stretched and torn and tested. It's hard to know who to trust, what to hope for, how not to be afraid.

And yet we gather here because the light of Christ has come into the world. We confess our faith in God's love, in Christ's light, and in the Spirit that inspires us and gives us life each day.

But where can we turn for this light, the light of Christ?

Well, did you hear the words of Jesus from today's gospel reading? "You ARE the light of the world," he says to us. And notice here what Jesus does NOT say. He does not say, "you *could* be the light of the world if you try," or, "you *would* be the light of the world if only you listened to me." No, he says "YOU ARE the light of the world!"

Take a moment right now and turn to the person sitting next to you and answer this question: When Jesus says, "YOU are the light of the world," do you believe he is talking about you?

Great. Now turn to that same person again for a moment and say whether you believe Jesus when he says this. ARE you the light of the world?

OK, so yes—YOU are the light of the world! You have been declared light by the One who is our light. And Jesus says, "Let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Being a light, shining that light means recognizing that our life here and now really does matter. Your voice matters. Your witness matters. God declares you to be light in and for the world...so how are you shining it?

Eventually, back in Punxatawney, Phil the weatherman eventually realizes that his life does matter very much. Slowly, he begins practicing daily acts of mercy and charity and love. He refuses to be controlled by his feelings of meaninglessness and fear. Phil understands that he can choose to shine his light each day in order to love and serve his neighbors, even if he wakes up tomorrow again and has to do it all over again.

Writing to a people conquered by war and with plenty of reasons to be afraid, the prophet Isaiah preaches, "If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger; the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noon day." (Is. 58:9b-10)

Being light means not pointing fingers or harboring animosity for others. "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket," says Jesus. Baskets obscure and hide and lead us to forget that we are already called light.

Whenever we are motivated by fear rather than love: bushel basket!

Whenever we point self-righteous fingers of blame rather than listen closely to the deep concerns of another: basket.

Whenever we seek only to preserve our own lives rather than come to the help of the needs of the afflicted: basket.

Whenever we pledge loyalty to anyone who is not the crucified One who came into the world as our light: basket.

"But put your lantern on the lampstand," says Jesus, "and it gives light to all in the house."

Whenever we forgive one another: lampstand!

Whenever we give generously of our gifts towards feeding a hungry world: lampstand!

Whenever we risk standing in the light of someone who may be different than us: lampstand!

Whenever we share our song, our praise, our joy, our prayer with this hurting world: lampstand!

So may the light that shines forth from this place shine all across our community, our city, our state, our world. After all, you are the light of the world! And Christ, who is our light and our salvation, will never, ever leave us.

Amen.