

**God Never Gives Up: Exile and Hope**

Scripture: Jer 7:1-7, Jer 31:31-34

Good morning! Happy Groundhog's Day! I don't know about you, but when our kids were growing up they loved the movie Groundhog Day. We watched it over and over and . . . over again. That movie has kind of taken over Groundhog's Day, isn't it? When you hear "Groundhog's Day" do you mainly think of Punxsutawney Phil telling us how long winter will last, or do you think of Bill Murray living the same day again and again and again? In the movie his clock radio goes off each morning with the same song, I Got You Babe. And every day Bill Murray gets to live the same 24 hours over again.

Reading about the people of Israel is kind of like Groundhog's Day—the movie. Over and over again we get the same mistakes, the same rebellions, the same failures. I remember as a kid thinking what is wrong with these people—stop the idol worship already! How hard is that? Actually, it is pretty hard. My own life shows that. An idol is something, even a good thing, that we put in the place where God belongs. My job, my family, my security, my plans, my stuff—all of those things sometimes nose their way into top priority in my life. The problem is not that the things we make idols are bad. They just can't bear the weight of being the most important thing—they will naturally get twisted out of shape and become distorted. As John Calvin said, our hearts are idol factories—we are constantly making idols. The Groundhog Day story of the people of Israel is very relevant to us, because we are just like them! Their mistakes look like ours!

Today we are continuing the Bible's big story about how God Never Gives Up. We are going to take a big picture look at: 1) how the Israelites turned away from God and towards the little-g gods they made up, 2) we'll see that, like them, our own idol worship and rejection of God has consequences, and 3) finally we'll see that despite all of our rebellion God stays faithful and promises to rescue us. So -- the long, repeated, Groundhog Day of idolatry and rejecting God has disastrous consequences, but God promises us rescue, despite our rebellion.

Last week we mostly focused on Jacob—or Israel, as he became known—which means wrestles with God. His sons became the 12 tribes of Israel. Fast forwarding to the end of Jacob’s life, they were all in Egypt, where generations later they eventually became enslaved and miserable. But God rescues them! They were suddenly and miraculously freed from the most powerful country in the world. The Red Sea parted and they were able to escape on dry land! But what happened as soon as they were out of Egypt? They made a literal idol—a golden calf—and started worshipping it as the god who had rescued them. Despite God’s rescue and miraculous provision for them in the desert, the people weren’t willing to trust him—so there were consequences. They had to wait and learn how to trust God after waiting in the desert for 40 years.

Eventually that generation died out and God was ready to lead his people into their promised land—he was with them as they finally got the land that God had promised to Abraham hundreds of years earlier. But the people often chose to follow their own rules rather than listen to God, and that resulted in problems, just like it does for you and me. Jewish scholar Martin Buber said that the Old Testament story is a history of God’s disappointments. A history of God’s disappointments—over and over again God’s people choose to turn away from God and to go their own way, leading to disaster. Again and again.

In Groundhog Day you see many, many versions of that day, each beginning the same and each ending the same, but the middle part is different. That is how the story of Israel goes too. People start off with God. Then they decide to do whatever they feel like doing and ignore God, making up their own gods instead. They end up in a mess and God saves them. Then they decide to follow their own wishes again. Wash, rinse, repeat. The Bible calls this attitude “everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” They did what was right in their own eyes. Does that sound familiar? Of course, that is what Adam and Eve did, and it describes what we are always tempted to do—to set ourselves up the ultimate decider of right and wrong. Who is your decider?

The Groundhog Day cycle went on—idolatry, rejection of God, enemies attacking, God rescuing them. It is a mess. Eventually the nation split in two. By the time of our readings today, only the southern kingdom, called Judah survived. But it was under threat from a

powerful empire—Babylon. That is where we are with our readings today. Jeremiah was a prophet who brought God’s message to the people of Judah. And it wasn’t good news.

Jeremiah’s message was bad news. It was a bummer. He is often called the weeping prophet because his message is so negative. The other book he wrote is literally called Lamentations. Jeremiah is the Debbie Downer of the Bible! Waa-wahh. But he was right. The people of Judah had convinced themselves that whatever they did didn’t matter, God would protect them -- they were his special people. They trusted their status more than their God. As the armies of Babylon approached Jerusalem, Jeremiah called out warnings. Still the people ignored him. They essentially covered their ears to avoid his message. They called him a traitor. They threw him down a well to get rid of him. But they didn’t pay attention to the warning.

In our first reading, from Jeremiah chapter 7, Jeremiah is standing in the gates of the temple and telling people—yet again—to turn back to God. Telling them, and us, to listen to what God says instead of doing whatever seemed right to them. God is warning the people to change their ways so they can stay in the Promised Land. If they don’t, they’ll be carried off by the approaching armies. That isn’t an idle threat, it already happened to their cousins in the northern kingdom of Israel. What God wants for them is clear. Look at verses 5 and 6. God says they should treat each other justly, don’t oppress the fatherless, the widow or the foreigner, don’t shed innocent blood, don’t follow other gods to your own harm—*then* you can stay in the land. God’s rules are not ways God bosses us around—they are safety rails that protect us from hurting ourselves and others. When we break those rules, people get hurt. It is like a rule against punching your fist through a window—doing it ends up hurting. You see, faith is never just mental assent to something—it shows up in how we live. Pastor Tim Keller says that God does not want his people to be passive believers, but active disciples. Not passive believers but active disciples. Here God is calling us to put our faith into action in how we treat each other.

Jeremiah’s warning is that our actions have consequences. You’d think down through all the years of Groundhog Day people would have picked up on this—turn away from God, make up your own rules, and things go badly. But turn back to God and he rescues us. But no. By now the people have shifted their faith away from God. Not only were they doing whatever

they wanted, but they also had made up reasons why they were safe. They were treating the temple like it was a good luck charm. Jeremiah was trying to wake them up to reality.

We often prefer our dreams to reality. We'd rather that things were the way we wish they were than the way they really are. But we have to live in reality, not a dream world. In the early 2000's a lot of people, including a lot of charities, started living in a dream world. They were thrilled to discover a money manager who offered steady and high rates of return, usually above the market return, but with no risk. They were reassured that so many others they knew were invested with this manager and getting good results too. So, group after group piled in—unknowingly providing more money to pay out to the early investors. Eventually, in December 2008 the scheme was discovered, and the house of cards collapsed. Bernie Madoff went to jail, but not before defrauding his clients of over \$65 BILLION dollars, the biggest Ponzi scheme ever. These groups had put their trust in the dream of high, safe and steady returns—something no one in the real world could offer. They ignored the warning signs and lost their money.

The people of Judah were putting their hopes in the dream of the Temple, not in the reality of God. That is what Jeremiah was calling “deceptive words”—saying “temple of the Lord, temple of the Lord, temple of the Lord.” They had convinced themselves that their good luck charm, the Temple, was so important that God would never let it be captured. They had replaced faith in God with faith in a building. Temples do not save, God saves. The people were trusting what they *imagined* was important to God—the physical temple in Jerusalem--and were ignoring God himself. They should have known better. For centuries they had worshipped God at a place called Shiloh, but by then it was in ruins. God reminds them---go look at Shiloh, the same thing could happen to this Temple.

Sure enough—Jeremiah's words are proven right—the king of Judah is carried off to Babylon, then eventually all of Jerusalem is conquered. The temple is destroyed. Everything they put their hope in was gone. All of the disaster that Jeremiah has been predicting comes true. Once again, we see that our actions have consequences—years of ignoring God's way and making up our own way resulted, yet again, in calamity. The promised land is gone. The special

city of Jerusalem is wiped out. God's temple is destroyed. The people are carried away into Exile. All is lost.

But God says it is not the end of the story. With God there is always hope. Our second reading is from chapter 31 of Jeremiah. Here the weeping, depressing prophet has changed his tune. Disaster came, despite all his warnings—the worst had happened. But it is not the end of the story. Now Jeremiah's message becomes one of hope. Before he was trying to wake up arrogant people before it is too late. Now he is encouraging people who are in the pit. People who have hit rock bottom and don't see any hope or any light, anywhere.

I think God is often doing both of those things—trying to wake up people who think they have everything under control and at the same time giving hope to people who know they don't have control over *anything*. He comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. He comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. That is not because God is mad at the comfortable; it is because comfortable people tend to not realize that they need help. They—we all too often-- think they are in a good position to make up their own rules. But eventually the comfortable run into affliction too—depression, loss of work, loss of meaning or purpose, loss of relationships, loss of health. Eventually all of us see that we really are not in control.

Whether you are comfortable or you are afflicted, the end of the story is good news. The comfortable may need to go through some more rounds of Groundhog Day before they are ready to turn back to God, but everybody eventually hears this good news from Jeremiah. This is how the Message puts it: "This is the brand-new covenant that I will make with Israel when the time comes. I will put my law within them—write it on their hearts! —and be their God. And they will be my people. They will no longer go around setting up schools to teach each other about GOD. They'll know me firsthand, the dull and the bright, the smart and the slow. I'll wipe the slate clean for each of them. I'll forget they ever sinned!" GOD's Decree.

All through the Old Testament God's people continually broke their promises to him, over and over they turned away; and over and over they suffered the consequences. But this cycle does not last forever. God promises a new relationship, he calls it a new covenant, that will break the cycle. A relationship where his people all know him intimately. Where his rules for living are in our hearts and minds, not just written down on a stone tablet someplace.

Where forgiveness is given, where we seek justice, visit the prisoners, welcome the foreigner, feed the hungry. Where wickedness does not have the last word. That new relationship, that new covenant is what Jesus brings.

As the movie Groundhog Day continues, and Bill Murray's character, Phil lives through that day over and over again, he goes through every emotion. He is mean, he is spiteful, he even tries suicide. Many times. None of it ends the cycle. Eventually he starts to try to improve himself. He learns piano. He grows to care about others. He goes out of his way to help people or to protect them. He even finds love. Real, self-giving love, not the taking, what's in it for me, pretend kind of love he wanted before. He is willing to give himself in love, regardless of the outcome. The next morning there is --finally-- a new song on the radio at 6 am. No explanation is given, just a dramatically different Phil going out into a new day to love and serve others.

In real life we are not saved from our repetitive rebellion by trying harder, or even by our own efforts. But we are saved by love. Love comes down and breaks through our idols, our rebellion, our cycle of destruction and sets us free. But that is a story for next week.

Let's pray: Lord Jesus—we are so bull headed and yet you are so patient. It is amazing. Lord, help us to turn to you. Help us to not fall for the trick of doing what seems right in our own eyes again. Protect us from the devices and desires of our hearts. Instead we ask you to come be our leader, our shepherd. Lead us in right paths, bring us by still waters, nourish our souls, set a feast for us. Be our shepherd and help us to realize we will not want for anything—you'll provide everything we really need. Forgive us for being foolish sheep, hold us close to you. In our name we ask it, Amen.