

“Halfway There”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Over breakfast one morning, a woman said to her husband, "I bet you don't know what day it is today."

"Of course I do," he answered indignantly, as he rushed out the door to work. An hour or so later, when the woman arrived at her own workplace, she was handed a box containing a dozen long-stemmed roses. Later on in the day, a two pound box of her favourite chocolates showed up. Finally, a boutique delivered a designer dress near the end of the day. The woman couldn't wait to see her husband that evening. "First the flowers, then the candy, then the dress!" she exclaimed. This is the most wonderful Groundhog Day ever!

So consider yourselves warned. Unless tomorrow actually is your anniversary, or a loved one's birthday, you should be off the hook. Unless, of course, you happen to have particularly elaborate Groundhog Day rituals, in which case, knock yourselves out.

Actually, if you think about it, maybe we're just lucky that Groundhog Day has yet to be fully commercialized, given that it has an equally rich religious and cultural history as Christmas, Easter, or Halloween.

Today, February 1st, is traditionally celebrated as Imbolc, in the Celtic Pagan tradition, or Candlemas in Christianity. Depending on who you ask, it's either the feast of St. Brigid, it a festival of hearth and home in honour of the goddess Brigid, and marks the halfway point between winter solstice and spring equinox. One tradition associated with Imbolc is divination, or future-telling, and this is where the connection with Groundhog Day is clear: watching the behavior of hibernating animals to try to predict what the path to springtime would look like, though in Europe it was usually hedgehogs or bears who were the weather forecasters.

Another tradition associated with this celebration is the cooking and eating of pancakes. Now, I know you might be thinking: "I thought pancakes were a tradition on Shrove Tuesday, or Mardi Gras, the day before the beginning of Lent. Well, I looked into it, and apparently it's traditional on both days. Given that Shrove Tuesday can sometimes be only a few days after February 1st - or over a month away, depending on the calendar - it seems likely that this is just a seasonal tradition that got mapped onto both occasions. Or maybe people just wanted an excuse to eat pancakes, which is fine with me. Not that I think you need an excuse.

For me, pancakes are a nostalgic comfort food, not only because they're delicious, but because they are also the very first food I learned to cook as a child. And so, I resonated

with a religious blogger I stumbled upon recently, who used the practice of flipping pancakes as a metaphor for her spiritual journey, and the importance of cultivating patience. If you try to flip the pancake too soon, she warns, you end up with batter everywhere. You need to wait until it's ready, all bubbly on the top, before slipping the spatula underneath and turning it over with a flick of the wrist.

And I think there may be some wisdom for all of us in this. Why are we in such a hurry to flip the pancake? Why are we so eager for spring to come, that we willingly turn over our powers of observation and decision-making to furry rodents who live underground and sleep half the year?

Maybe because it's fun. Or maybe it's because we have a hard time appreciating the view from where we are: the in-between time. And there is something special about this time. On the clear, cold and crisp days we sometimes have in late January and February, there is a special quality to the sunlight, a hint of warmth that we have to pause to fully appreciate. This is the only time all year when we're perched on this magnificent spinning earth at this exact spot in its orbit around the sun. This is something extraordinary. This is good news!

It's cliché to say that life is a journey, not a destination. But it's a cliché because it's true. More true, I think, is that life is a series of waystations, each offering its own gifts and perspectives. Childhood, youth, old age and elderhood, all are unique and special, each more than a place on the way to or from somewhere else.

As A.A. Milne puts it, "halfway down the stairs, is a stair I sit. There isn't any other stair, quite like it."

I think the ancient Celts were onto something, not only marking the spring and fall equinoxes and summer and winter solstices, but the halfway points in between: Imbolc in February, Beltane at the beginning of May, Lughnasa in August, Samhain at the end of October, celebrations which are paralleled in other traditions as well. These halfway points may be less glamorous, but they still matter. The view may not be spectacular, but it is irreducibly unique.

So, Happy Imbolc, Joyous Candlemas, and very Merry Groundhog Day to you. May this day be blessed; there isn't any other day quite like it.