

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
February 21, 2021

Again and Again

Psalm 62

In the 1993 film *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray portrays Phil Connors, a cynical television weatherman covering the annual Groundhog Day event in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. Connors becomes trapped in a time loop forcing him to relive February 2 repeatedly. Every morning he wakes up to Sonny & Cher's "I Got You Babe" playing on the clock radio, and then experiences the previous day's events repeating exactly. At first, Phil uses these loops to his advantage, binge drinking, having one-night stands, and driving recklessly while drunk. But after a while, he becomes depressed, and even commits suicide in a variety of ways. After he dies, he simply wakes up listening to Sonny & Cher, in the same bed, on the same day, over and over again.

Phil decides to confide in his new producer, Rita, who encourages him to see the loops as a blessing instead of a curse. Eventually, Phil dedicates himself to improving his life as well as the life of the townsfolk. By the end of the film, he has fallen in love with Rita, and the time loop is broken. It's now February 3, Phil is a different man, and he and Rita walk out into the snowy town for a better life together.

Though our monotony may not be as extreme as it was for Phil Connors, life during the coronavirus pandemic can start to feel like a time loop. Reliving the same day, over and over and over again. Waking up in the same space, going about the same indoor activities, staring at the same computer screen, sticking to the same schedule of meals, following the same news reports and weather forecasts, going to bed at the same time, then waking up and starting the cycle all over again. It's no wonder that many people have sought ways to break free from COVID monotony. Finding ways to get outside, weather permitting. Taking up a new hobby. Beginning a new exercise program. Getting creative with cooking. Discovering new ways to interact with your children. Whatever will make today seem at least a little different from yesterday, or tomorrow.

Of course, repetition can be a positive, beneficial thing as well. Monotony can have its benefits. Henry David Thoreau wrote, "Routine is a ground to stand on, a wall to retreat to; we cannot draw on our boots without bracing ourselves against it." There is a certain stability that comes with repetition. In order to move forward, we often need to return to things that are already familiar to us. We need to keep circling back and gathering up things that will help us advance in our faith.

In today's text, the psalmist uses repetition as a way of expressing trust in the Lord. Notice that verses 1 and 5 are very similar. "My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation/hope comes from him." And verses 2 and 6 are almost identical. "He alone is my rock and salvation; he is my fortress, I will never/not be shaken. Taken together, these verses form a refrain, much like the chorus of a song. In the chorus, we return to an essential affirmation or belief, in this case confidence in God. In *Groundhog Day*, Phil Connors repeatedly woke up to "I Got You Babe." But on the Lord's Day, we always tune in to the psalmist, whose chorus is "My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him." There's another feature of this psalm that we should notice. The Hebrew word translated as "alone" or "only" occurs six times in this short poem. It occurs only 24 times in the entire

book of Psalms, which means that 25 percent of its appearances are in today's text. By repeating this terminology, the psalmist reinforces the fact that we have one God, and only one God. The Lord alone is our hope and our salvation. This is something that we come back to, over and over. It's the theological loop in which we live, and by which we live.

We live in it in a unique way on the Lord's Day. Today is when we assemble to do things that we've done many times before. To sing, pray, preach, and give, Sunday after Sunday, week after week, again and again. Congregational worship is about repetition, not as a burden but as a blessing. True, repetition can become dangerous when it grows empty and is done just for the sake of doing it. But the fact remains, we need this routine, and the rhythm that comes with it. It gives structure and shape to our spiritual lives. Indeed, God uses the patterns and repetition of worship to shape us as his people and to form us more into the likeness of Christ.

In his book, *You Are What You Love*, James K. A. Smith talks about the ways our hearts are formed. He says:

There is no formation without repetition. Virtue formation takes practice, and there is no practice that isn't repetitive. We willingly embrace repetition as a good in all kinds of other sectors of our life—to hone our golf swing, our piano prowess, and our mathematical abilities, for example. If the sovereign Lord has created us as creatures of habit, why should we think repetition is inimical to our spiritual growth?¹

Sometimes we slip into the misconception that worship is primarily something that we do for God. And there is some truth in that. When we assemble on Sunday morning, or when you worship individually, engaging in personal praise and thanks, we're engaging in action, offering ourselves to the Lord. But most of all, God is acting, moving, working upon us, often through the things that we do over and over as acts of worship.

This doesn't mean that we should set aside creativity, reject novelty, or resist change. After all, in Christ we're part of God's new creation. We're being transformed into the people God intends us to be, which requires being open to newness. But that newness often works its way into us through what's already familiar and routine. In an interview for *Rolling Stone*, actor Jeff Bridges was asked what advice he wished he had received when he was 20 years old. He said:

I got the advice—I just didn't take it! My dad would say, "It's all about habit, Jeff. You gotta get into good habits." And I said, "No, Dad, you gotta live each moment. Live it as the first one and be fresh." And he says, "That's a wonderful thought, but that's not what we are. We are habitual creatures. It's about developing these grooves." As I age, I can see his point. What you practice, that's what you become.²

Grooves matter. You need them. They're critical in determining who you are and what you become. Without repetition, without the practices that form our hearts into the will and way of God, we can start to rely on things other than the promises of God. We begin to place our confidence in things that can't deliver. Remember the psalmist's refrain: "My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation/hope comes from him."

That's certainly worth repeating at all times, including circumstances like the present. As I mentioned earlier, the coronavirus has our lives in a loop that wears on our endurance. Our faith gets challenged by the daily repetition of social distancing, mask wearing, sickness, death, financial stress, isolation, and uncertainty about when it will all end. In the face of what seems like unrelenting risk and threat, we, like the psalmist ask, "How long?" (v. 3). And perhaps you, like the psalmist, have begun to feel like a "leaning wall," a "tottering fence" (v. 3). It won't take much more to topple you. These are the kinds of circumstances

where you and I don't have to come up with something completely novel. We don't have to embark on a great spiritual experiment into uncharted territory. We simply need to go back to where we've been many times before. We need to return to what we've heard before, and profess what we've professed before, namely that the Lord is "my rock," "my fortress," and "my refuge" (vv. 6-7). "He alone is my salvation." This is the groove in which we live, no matter what's happening to us or around us.

In *The Practice of the Presence of God*, Brother Lawrence wrote,

We cannot avoid the dangers and the reefs of which this life is full, without the real and constant help of God. Let us ask him for it without ceasing. But how can we ask him without being with him? And how can we be with him without often thinking of him? And how can we often think of him without forming a holy habit of doing so?³

The life of faith is a life of cultivating holy habits. Some of these habits come to the fore even more this time of the year, as many followers of Jesus focus on the spiritual disciplines of Lent. Personal and corporate worship, Scripture study, prayer, silence, fasting, and giving attract increased attention. In addition to these traditional types of spiritual disciplines, holy habits include broader practices like loving, sacrificing, peacemaking, encouraging, and listening. These are the patterns and the rhythms of discipleship. They're the routines, in the most positive sense, of trusting in the Lord.

When the western United States was being settled, roads were often just wagon tracks. These rough trails posed all sorts of problems for those who traveled on them. On one of these paths a sign was posted that read: "Avoid this rut or you'll be in it for the next twenty-five miles!"

Granted, a rut can be a bad thing. But sometimes we need ruts. They help us stay the course and reach a destination that still hasn't come fully into view. The right kind of spiritual rut, or routine, can get you through hardship and suffering. It can sustain you when you feel like giving up on God's sovereignty. It can keep you from veering onto paths that may look like the way to get ahead, but are really just roads that lead to destruction. In the end, "My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him."

Writing about our current circumstances, Anne Kerhoulas says,

We are left staring down the winter months of dogged monotony at home. But perhaps these unyielding months of the pandemic have revealed something we have not wanted to address: Our lives are full of monotony and repetition, and they always will be.

Trying to evade a life marked by repetition is misguided—repetition is a fundamental reality of being human, and the pandemic has only heightened our awareness of it. We are creatures of *again*; we are made for *again*. So why does repetition feel like a curse instead of a blessing?⁴

On this, another Lord's Day, let's give thanks for the *blessing* of repetition, and for the ordinary, daily spiritual routines that equip us to face adversity and sustain us in our faith. Let's keep doing, again and again and again, the things that reinforce and reflect our trust in the Lord. He alone is our salvation.

¹ Quoted in Daniel Darling, "Boring Church Services Changed My Life." Christianity Today website. Accessed February 18, 2021 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2017/february-web-exclusives/boring-church-services-changed-my-life.html>>.

² Andy Greene, "The Last Word." *Rolling Stone* (September 2016).

³ Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 31, No. 8.

⁴ Anne Kerhoulas, "What Another Year of Routine Teaches Us about God." Christianity Today website. January 29, 2021. Accessed February 18, 2021 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/january-web-only/gk-chesterton-another-year-of-routine-can-teach-about-god.html?utm_source=CT+Pastors+Newsletter&utm_medium=Newsletter&utm_term=4787&utm_content=2053&utm_campaign=email>.