

GROUNDHOG DAY Mark 1:21-28

January 31, 2021 Pastor Bill Mosley

When I worked the midnight shift in San Antonio, I drove about 20 miles to get to work, after 11 o'clock at night, and most of it through open country, because we lived outside the big city. There was a crossroads with a traffic light and left turn lanes and a long cycle, and usually when I got there the light was red. So I stopped. I don't think I ever saw another car there at that time of night. I would sit there for two or three minutes, it was that long a cycle. Not another car in sight. But I couldn't go until the light turned green. I might be in a hurry. I might be late. I might be hungry. I might need gas. But I had to stop and wait until the light turned green. Why? Because the traffic light had more authority than any of my needs. If you made a movie of me stopped there and showed it to a Martian, he would think I looked awfully silly. An electric light with an automatic control and colored lens controlled my actions.

Why do we do the things we do? What makes us what we are? How did we get this way? What's behind the kinds of decisions we make, from what to say when someone asks "How are you?" to what kind of car to buy or what occupation we will choose?

What do you think of yourself? What do you think of the world? what kind of place is it? Who's in charge of it, and who's in charge of you? How you answer those last two questions determines the answers to all the rest.

Who's in charge? What's the authority that makes us do the things we do?

There's a movie called **GROUNDHOG DAY**. It's a Bill Murray movie, and it has its funny moments. But it really is a message picture. Murray plays Phil Connor, a TV weather man. He's a pessimist, unhappy, and disappointed in life. He has an attitude, and everyone he sees he tries to make unhappy, pessimistic, or disappointed. Misery loves company. And since he's miserable he thinks everyone else should be too. He thinks the world revolves around him. We look into his life on February 1, just as he leaves for Punxatawny, Pennsylvania, to do a story on the famous Groundhog, Punxatawny Phil, as he emerges on Groundhog Day, to check for his shadow and determine the weather for the rest of winter. That's a lot of authority to give a shadow.

There's a blizzard, and Phil Connor the weatherman who hates small towns and people, has to spend the rest of the day and night in Punxatawny. And he sees his shadow self.

He wakes up the next day to find he has to relive February 2 all over again. And the next day is again February 2. The radio is playing the same record, the blizzard comes again, he can't leave Punxatawny. He can't get on with his life.

He alone remembers that we've lived this day already. Nobody else does anything different. He alone knows that he can do anything -- wreck a car, rob a bank, go around hitting people, get drunk, pick up loose women, whatever he wants, and there will be no consequences. He does all these things and he starts hating his life. He kills himself. He still has to live February 2, Groundhog Day, all over again. And he sees his shadow.

He begins to think there must be something he's supposed to learn, something he's supposed to do, that gets the calendar started again. We don't know if the world goes on without him while he's stuck on February 2, but we see him change. Of course, everyone thinks he's the same old jerk, because the day starts every morning just like it was. He begins to do good deeds. He learns French. He learns to play the piano. He begins to save lives. He falls in love.

Remember, he has the day memorized. He knows when the accidents will happen, when the boy will fall out of the tree, when the homeless man will die of starvation, when the old ladies will have the flat tire, when the engaged couple will have the argument that breaks them up. And after all that practice, he knows what to do to change things. He catches the falling boy, changes the flat tire, feeds the homeless man, intervenes in the argument. All is well and right with the world. Again and again. He begins to overcome his shadow.

Now, after all the bank robberies, fights, and drunken nights, why does he start to do good? What changes him? What finally makes it possible for him to wake up on February 3, after the hundreds of February 2's? Something good replaces the bad in his life. Some higher authority begins to order his life. -- Mosley, EMPHASIS, January-February 2000, p. 50

I read somewhere that when you break a bad habit, you have to replace it with something good, or it will come back. I would suppose that if you cast out a demon, you better replace it with something good, or it will leave a void that it can return to or something else will nest in. Replace the bad habits with good habits, the bad authority with good authority. Replace the shadow with light.

"There are many gods and many lords" -- as Paul warns us. What do we choose to follow as our authority in this world?

We deal with the demons daily: alcoholism, drug and other addictions, road rage, feelings of inadequacy, the things that rob people of their dignity and ability to live meaningful lives. Anger, hatred, fears and doubts, pettiness. In some respects we fight these demons every day. There is a power beyond us that can release us from bondage. I believe that is the power Jesus has to free people and bring about renewal and growth. I'm not talking about creepy little creatures but real hang-ups that keep people from being all that God wants them to be.

Jesus had no legitimacy. He was a carpenter and the son of a carpenter from Nazareth. He had no legitimate authority to stand up in the temple and teach. But he had a different kind of authority: the authority of passionate conviction of a truth not only declared but intentionally practiced in committed action. For the last 25 centuries of philosophical reflection on authority, we have learned no more than this: the ultimate authority for what you know and believe is the existential decision to live accordingly, that is, to act as if what you think is true is in fact true. A red light means stop. A green light means go.

In other words, talk the talk and walk the walk.

Jesus had the authority of life force. And that life force touched others, angering some, liberating others. Jesus was not a legitimate authority, and when he approached the man with the unclean spirit he engaged another who was illegitimate. the man with "the unclean spirit" was cleansed, encouraged, exhilarated, liberated, healed by the truth in Jesus' deviant behavior.

This new authority replaced what was ruining his life.

So, what is your authority? What runs your life, controls your decisions? do you need to keep repeating Groundhog Day until you find the good of life, the joy of living, the kindness and love of people that makes life worth living new each day? That's the kind of power and authority that Jesus gives.

Lord, help us to surrender to your authority, that we may say no to everything that makes it more difficult to say yes to you.