

REJECTING THE GROUNDHOG'S GRIP

by Father Frank Marangos

"Forgiveness is the fragrance that the flower leaves on the heel of the one who crushed it."
Mark Twain

On February 2nd the famous Groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil, saw his shadow. According to tradition, groundhogs stir from their restful hibernation to take a peek at the outside world and predict how much longer the chill of winter will continue. Since the little creatures do not enjoy the light, they scurry back into their burrows for another six weeks of winter depending on whether or not the outside world is cloudy or sunny. According to Phil's forecast, we are in for six more weeks of winter.

The first Groundhog Day observance occurred on February 2, 1887 in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. The date was chosen as it marks the midpoint between the winter solstice in December and the spring equinox in March. Apart from its superstitious pagan roots as a Celtic festival, Groundhog Day's deeper meaning speaks to the triumph of spring over winter, light over darkness, and birth over death. In commemoration of the presentation of the Christ Child in the temple of Jerusalem that occurs on the same day, the Christian church later called this festival of light over darkness, *Candlemas*.

It is significant that this year's commemoration of Groundhog day corresponds to the reading of the Parable of Prodigal Son, the Gospel lesson of the 2nd Sunday of the Holy Triodion, the liturgical book that encompasses a 72-day period of preparation for the Feast of our Lord's Resurrection. Preceded by the Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14), the scriptural passage was chosen to be read during the Triodion's pre-lenten cycle in order to emphasize how the Light of God's forgiveness has the power to release us from the hibernating grip of our respective groundhogs.

By nature, humans resemble groundhogs. We do not like the light. When we encounter the light's full force, we shield our eyes and run for the shade. We do not like the light because it shows us who we are. In fact, from the very first verses of the Old Testament, sinful humanity is characterized as "hiding from God" as He comes searching for Adam and Eve "in the cool of the day" (Genesis 3:8).

It is significant, therefore, that the Prodigal Son "came to himself" (his right senses) while feeding a herd of hogs. While the light revealed his sinfulness, it also provided the possibility of forgiveness. By resisting the temptation to flee from the light, it allowed him to see himself as his father would see him. He would soon discover that his father did not see him a "hired servant" but as a son who was "once lost and now found . . . once dead and alive again" (Luke 15:31).

Ernest Hemingway describes the touching story of a father and his teenage son with a strained relationship. While the son ultimately ran away from home, his father did not give up on him and began a journey in search of his rebellious son. Finally, in a last desperate effort to find him, the father put an ad in the Madrid newspaper. The ad read: "DEAR PACO, MEET ME IN FRONT OF THE CATHEDRAL AT NOON. ALL IS FORGIVEN. I LOVE YOU. YOUR FATHER." The next day at noon in front of the Madrid Church, 800 "Pacos" showed up.

The irony of this year's simultaneous celebration of Groundhog Day, Candlemas, and the Sunday of the Prodigal Son is realized when they are juxtaposed against the theology of shadow and light. The story of every Prodigal Paco is replete with shadowy places, choices, and actions. As a result, we hide in the darkness avoiding the light because of our shame or guilt. We are blind to our own identity, lost on the path of life, seemingly without meaning or direction.

The Light of God's forgiveness has the power to transform and alter our wayward lives. Our Heavenly Father's forgiveness invites all Prodigal Pacos to return home and to reject the lure to hibernate in the dark boroughs dug by the hogs of our respective sinfulness. This is the central message of 2nd Sunday of the Triodion – that God's forgiveness allows us to experience comfort, strength and rebirth.