

February 4, 2026



## PASTORAL MEDITATION by Reverend Thomas Hawkins

### WHAT DO GROUNDHOG DAY AND ST. BRIGID HAVE IN COMMON?

The verdict is in. A rodent in Pennsylvania announced yesterday that we can expect six more weeks of winter. February 2 is Groundhog Day and everyone waits in anticipation for the Punxsutawney Phil's long-range forecast. But why does Groundhog Day always happen on February 2? Is this just a random choice by businesses in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, to encourage post-Christmas tourist trade? Or is there a particular reason to choose February 2 as Groundhog Day?

There is, in fact, a reason for Groundhog Day always occurring on February 2, which is 40 days after Christmas and thus corresponds to a relatively obscure holy day in the traditional Christian calendar. According to Luke 2:22-40, Mary and Joseph followed Mosaic law in coming to the Temple 40 days after Jesus' birth for rites of purification for the mother and dedication of the child. According to Mosaic law, a mother was to come to the Temple 40 days after giving birth and to make an offering of a lamb and a dove. In a lovely 10<sup>th</sup>-century sermon, Aelfric, a Benedictine monk in an Oxfordshire monastery speaks about the meaning of this offering of a lamb and a dove. "A lamb betokens innocence and the greater kind of goodness; but if we are so wretched that we cannot offer to God that greater goodness, then we should bring him two turtle-doves or two young pigeons; that is, a twofold burgeoning of awe and love." The doves represent our stirring of love in the smallest and least of offerings, which anyone can give, even if we are not capable of great acts of service or virtue as represented by the lamb.

Before February 2 was Groundhog Day it was the Christian Feast of the Purification. In the English-speaking world, February 2 is called Candlemas because it included the blessing of candles and processing with them into the church. Worshippers re-enacted Joseph and Mary's entrance into the Temple with the infant Jesus, the light of the world; and then the priest blessed their candles. Worshippers could imagine themselves as carrying the Christ child in their hands in the form of a dancing flame just as Mary carried the Christ Child in her arms into the Temple. Worshippers took their blessed candles home with them and then lit them on special occasions during the year as a reminder that Christ is the light of the world.

With Candlemas, the medieval church's Christmas cycle officially came to an end. Traditionally Candlemas or February 2 was the day on which the remaining holly and ivy, greenery and other Christmas decorations were removed and replaced by boxwood in anticipation of Lent and Easter. The 17<sup>th</sup>-century poet and Anglican priest Robert Herrick describes this in his poem "Candlemas Eve."

*Down with the rosemary and bays,  
Down with the mistletoe;  
Instead of holly, now up-raise*

*The greener box[wood] (for show ).  
The holly hitherto did sway ;  
Let box[wood] now domineer  
Until the dancing Easter day,  
Or Easter's eve appear...*

*Thus times do shift; each thing his turn does hold;  
New things succeed, as former things grow old.*

But how did American Groundhog Day come to attach itself to this ancient Christian festival that may go back to the fourth century and had arrived in the British Isles before the tenth century? The answer lies in the folklore of 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century German immigrants who settled in Pennsylvania. They brought many of their customs with them, one of which was to predict the coming of spring based on Candlemas' weather. This was also a practice among English-speaking Christians as well. A 17<sup>th</sup>-century collection of English proverbs identifies Candlemas weather as a predictor of spring's arrival.

*If Candlemas day be fair and bright  
Winter will have another flight.  
If on Candlemas day it be shower and rain,  
Winter is gone and will not come again.*

Sound familiar? It's the same basic predictive rubric upon which Punxsutawney Phil relies. This proverb came to America via German immigrants to Pennsylvania. The German version said, if the badger encountered sunshine on Candlemas and therefore saw his shadow, he crawled back into his hole to stay for four more weeks, which would be a continuation of winter weather. Not seeing many badgers in their New World home, these German immigrants adopted the Groundhog as a reasonable substitute for their weather-predicting badger. Hence, we arrive at Punxsutawney Phil and February 2 and Groundhog Day.

February 2, however, has a still more ancient significance than Candlemas and Groundhog Day. The pre-Christian Celtic calendar placed special emphasis on what it called "cross-quarter" days. These are the days that lie halfway between a solstice and an equinox. It is uncanny how these cross-quarter days still align with modern celebrations as well as church feast days. Our May Day celebrations (both Socialist parades and a now defunct tradition of "may baskets" and dancing around May poles) align with the Celtic feast of Beltane as does our Halloween with the Celtic feast of Samhain. Candlemas and Groundhog Day correspond to the Celtic cross-quarter festival of Imbolc. Imbolc marks the point in the year when, although some of the worst weather might still be to come, nevertheless the first signs of spring's hope and life are emerging. Celtic peoples celebrated Imbolc halfway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. It was when flocks of ewes began bearing their spring lambs. Born in late winter and on the cusp of spring, these lambs would be weaned just as pastures began to green in March. In Ireland where older Celtic customs have never completely disappeared, the church's feast of Candlemas and our secular Groundhog Day also align with St. Brigid's Day. Brigid along with Patrick is one of Ireland's most beloved saints. Her symbol, as I mentioned on Sunday, is a sun-shaped cross woven of green reeds.

Whether we call it Candlemas, St. Brigid's Day, or Groundhog Day, it's no accident all three are loosely aligned with the much more ancient pre-Christian cross-quarter day of Imbolc. They remind us of the ways in which very ancient patterns and lifeways still persist across millennia of change. When we joke about Punxsutawney Phil we are linked to a change of memory that reaches back to medieval Christians bringing their candles home from a late winter holy day and a still more ancient Celtic cross-quarter festival of Imbolc with its promise of fertility and the waning of winter's famine and cold. They link us also to St. Brigid and her role in Christianizing Ireland.

February 2 with all its many associations speak to our deep human need for hope as the coldest and darkest season of year drags on and on. It reminds us that we are on the cusp of a turning point in the passage of the year. Our passive submission to winter's blast is finally, slowly, giving way to an active embrace of the growing light around us. We know storms and dark days still lie ahead but we also know that the worst is behind us. And for that we can give our Christ, the light of the world, thanks and praise.

Blessings, Thomas

### [KENSINGTON FOOD PANTRY- Valentine Collection](#)

We continue to serve the families at Kensington School, helping them feed their children through the cold winter months. The need is great and we fill five bags each week for five different families. February is the month we kick off our "Share the Love" food drive. On Sunday, **February 8th**, we will be passing out grocery bags to everyone after church. Hopefully, you will be able to put some nourishing food items in the bag so we can keep our shelves at the food pantry full. The Dollar Store is a great place to pick up a bag of rice, box of pasta, pasta sauce, box of crackers, cookies, soup, jam, etc. You can return the bags by February 22nd. This church really knows how to "**Share the Love**" of God and I want to thank you for your continuing support. We couldn't do this important work without you.

### [NOTE](#)

Last Sunday was a wonderful experience of First Congregational Church's spirit. When deacons and others arrived to prepare communion and open up the church, the sanctuary heat was in the mid-50s. At 9:30, the decision was made not to worship in a frigid sanctuary but to move worship to fellowship hall. As worshippers arrived, we were in the midst of moving flowers and candles from the sanctuary, bringing down the bulletins and hymnals, setting up chairs, and

assembling a temporary table for communion. Everyone pitched in as they arrived and found themselves sitting in a chair rather than a pew.

No one panicked. No one grumbled or wondered who or what was to blame. No one turned around and went home. No single person took charge and tried to organize everyone else. It turned out to be a memorable morning. We sat near each other. The singing was a cappella but enthusiastic. We received two new members and shared in Holy Communion with one another. After worship, there was much laughter and conversation around hastily reset round tables and circled chairs. The whole morning demonstrated what a healthy congregation we are. We adapted easily to something unexpected, we worked together as a group. Each person was thinking of how they could pitch in without waiting for someone else to organize and tell them what to do. I watched it all unfold and was so grateful to God for the strength I saw at work in First Congregational Church.

Our only regret is that those who usually tune in for our livestream had no idea what happened to Sunday worship because the screen was dark.

I am certain the furnace will have been repaired and we'll be back in the sanctuary this Sunday. I will miss sharing in our return to the sanctuary this Sunday. Many thanks to Walter who will be preaching this coming Sunday while Jan and I are away.

With prayer,  
Pastor Thomas

## PRAYER

God of icicles and snowflakes: As February's cold and ice drag on, we give you thanks for your Child Jesus, the light of the world. Even as the infant Jesus grew slowly into the adult who would proclaim that your Reign had come, we know the sun's strength is growing day by day to melt the snow and to swell silently every bulb and bud. As everything around us lies wrapped in a mantle of snow, enfold us in your warm cloak of light and truth. Like the sun that shines stronger each day, strengthen in us the desire to grow into greater wholeness in mind, spirit, and body that we may serve you faithfully in the world. Amen.



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