

The Religious Origins of Groundhog Day

Americans know today, February 2, as Groundhog Day, when Punxsutawney Phil is brought out of his tree-trunk in Northwestern Pennsylvania to determine how much longer winter will last.

For Christians, it's also the Feast of Candlemas. Most people assume that Groundhog Day and Candlemas are not connected, but in fact—as I recently discovered—they are!

The Feast of Candlemas is also known as the Feast of Christ's Presentation in the Temple. It commemorates the day when 40 days after his birth, according to Jewish custom, Jesus Christ would have been brought to the Jerusalem Temple so that his mother could be ritually purified and he offered to God (with a sacrifice of "two turtle doves"!).

In the biblical account of the Presentation, Jesus is proclaimed by the figure of Simeon as "the light to the Gentiles." Hence, candles became symbolically associated with the feast, and a special blessing of candles and procession with them would take place on this day.

And, as Francis Weiser explains in his [*Handbook of Christian Feasts & Customs*](#), Candlemas also had a tradition of weather forecasting attached to it:

"All over Europe Candlemas was considered one of the great days of weather forecasting. Popular belief claims that bad weather and cloudy skies on February 2 mean an early and prosperous summer. If the sun shines through the greater part of Candlemas Day, there will be forty more days of snow. This superstition is familiar to all in our famous story of the ground hog looking for his shadow on Candlemas Day."

The [History Channel](#) further connects some of the dots between Candlemas and Punxsutawney Phil:

“Groundhog Day has its roots in the ancient Christian tradition of Candlemas Day, when clergy would bless and distribute candles needed for winter. The candles represented how long and cold the winter would be. Germans expanded on this concept by selecting an animal—the hedgehog—as a means of predicting weather. Once they came to America, German settlers in Pennsylvania continued the tradition, although they switched from hedgehogs to groundhogs, which were plentiful in the Keystone State.”

By the way, if you believe the superstition, apparently we will have an early spring, as Punxsutawney Phil [did not see his shadow](#) this morning. Of course, he's only right about [46% of the time](#).