
The Light of Christ in the Winter

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
The Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord – Year A

What a spectacular day this is! What a day to pay attention to! But, what exactly are we celebrating today?

Well, according to much of the United States, today is Super Bowl Sunday, of course. What else? Even those of us without a dog in the hunt have noticed the drama. And even those of us who don't care for football might care for the annual outpouring of new television commercials. As for those of us who care for neither football nor commercials, well we still know something spectacular is occurring.

But, wait, there may be another reason we are paying attention to this day. Those of us in the Christian Church know this day, February 2, as a special feast day. Today is the Feast of the Presentation, when his faithful parents, following tradition, brought their forty-day-old child to the Temple, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. Jesus is revealed as a light to the nations, the Light of the World!

I, for one, am thrilled at this confluence and coincidence of celebrations. I am glad that the Super Bowl occurs so closely to the Feast of the Presentation every year.

Tell the folks in Las Vegas that this is my wager: that fewer than ten professional football players have ever used the words "Super Bowl" and "Feast of the Presentation" in the same sentence. Hey! While we're at it, let's throw in Groundhog Day. Groundhog Day actually falls upon one of the major feast days of the Church: the Feast of the Presentation. Our Church has also called this day "Candlemas," and we have lit candles.

I believe that all these events have something in common. They are ways that our community, our civilization, hopes for life and yearns for light in the midst of winter.

Let's start with the Super Bowl, where much of our North American culture will be focused today. Consider the gatherings, the parties, the festivities around Sunday night. This is ritual at its most primordial. People plan schedules and change behavior and spend their resources for this event; in my book, this behavior is exactly the definition of a religion. The powers that change your schedules and order your lives and to which you offer your money are usually what we call "gods." It's a religion. I will not dwell on its low points today. But, at its best, "Super Bowl Religion" shows us the fruit of discipline and respect and—yes—even advertising creativity.

The Super Bowl usually falls right in the middle of winter (in North America). So does February 2, which is the Feast of the Presentation. The day falls almost exactly midway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. Though winter "begins," officially, on December 21, it is rarely as cold then as it is in the middle of winter – about February 2. Thus, our ancestors realized and devised all sorts of mid-winter feasts and festivals to remind them that Spring was coming.

Christians began to observe this mid-winter day as "the Purification," or "the Feast of the Presentation." According to tradition, the young child Jesus was to be presented in the Temple 40 days after his birth.

However, the tradition of lighting candles, "Candlemas," comes closest to recognizing what is going on in our natural world. There really is no clear church history of how candles became associated with the Presentation. My sense is that candles, really, just happened. So, I let the tradition be. There is no official and acknowledged beginning. Thus, I believe, it simply has to do with our yearning for light in mid-winter.

On February 2, Christians began to light candles. Today, at Christian churches across the world, people light

candles and walk in procession; they walk toward the light, even in the deep mid-winter, as we will here at the Cathedral this afternoon.

Something in our human condition will always long and lean for light. We yearn for its energy, especially when we miss it the most, in the bleak mid-winter. Somehow or another, strangely enough, our secular Groundhog Day is also associated with the longing for this light! We are wondering just how long it will be before Spring comes. Will the groundhog see his shadow or not? Is there sunshine on Groundhog Day—too early—or not?

I have no idea whether all the bellwether groundhogs across the United States will see their shadows on this February 2 or not. Instead, I carry a handy little poem, which I always use when the weather turns unpleasant:

Whether the weather be mild
or whether the weather be not,
Whether the weather be cold
or whether the weather be hot,

We'll weather the weather
whatever the weather,
Whether we like it or not.

And, no matter who actually wins the Super Bowl tonight, all of our country is strangely warmed on Super Bowl Sunday gathering in parties, and watching the festivities.

But in the Christian Church, we are celebrating the Light of the World! And, today, just as people are making one last run to the grocery store, stocking up for the Super Bowl game, many Christian churches will observe Candlemas and the Presentation. They will light every candle they can find, a ritual that symbolizes the Light of Christ in the world.

It is still wintertime; but today our world has turned toward spring. Yes, there will be more cold snaps. There may even be an ice storm. But the earth has now turned around the sun toward spring. The Church hopes the same thing about life today. Perhaps our health is bad right now. Perhaps our finances seem bleak right now. Maybe we are frustrated and disgusted by our national politics. Maybe it is winter. But in this darkness, God turns toward light, toward health.

I encourage us, then, to present ourselves to this God of Light. Like Mary and Joseph, present yourselves and your offspring to God in the holy temple today. Come to that place—the Church!—which has preserved and proclaimed light even during the darkest times. Light your candles today, either literally or figuratively.

Sometimes, it seems we are waiting an eternity for the darkness to dissipate. It looks like Simeon, and certainly Anna, had been going to the temple for many years, searching, before they finally recognized that light had come. Maybe like waiting for the groundhog to come out in the winter. Maybe like waiting for our home team to get to the Super Bowl. Maybe like yearning for our particular political persuasion to prevail.

But, we are speaking of the Light of Christ – bigger, of course, so much larger than our games and even our politics. It was the Light of Christ who came to Simeon and Anna! The light of Christ comes to the faithful. And the light of Christ also comes *through* the faithful.

One of great ways that Jesus described himself was as the Light, the Light of the World. But Jesus also told us that *we, we ourselves*, are the light of the world. It's not Groundhog Day or Super Bowl Sunday that brings true light to the world. It's not even the great traditions and customs of the church, though each of those events plays its part. The true light is us – you and me—and how we behave during all these events. *You* are the light of the world; let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

AMEN.

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