
The Super Bowl, Groundhog Day, and the Light of the World

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A Sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Proper 5A

*Jesus said, "You are the light of the world.
, Let your light shine before others,
that they may see your good works
and glorify your father in heaven." -Matthew 5:14,16*

What a week this has been! Last Wednesday, while most of our country was observing Groundhog Day, our Cathedral was celebrating the Feast of the Presentation, AND the grand opening of the Cathedral Antiques Show! Today, while most of our country is observing Super Bowl Sunday, our Cathedral is listening to Jesus say, "You are the light of the world!"

Groundhog Day, the Cathedral Antiques Show, the Feast of the Presentation, Super Bowl Sunday, the Light of the World! What a week this has been! What exactly are we celebrating today?

Well, first of all, I say this every year: I am glad that the Super Bowl occurs so closely to the Feast of the Presentation.

Tell the folks in Las Vegas that this is my wager: less than ten professional football players have ever used the words "Super Bowl" and "Feast of the Presentation" in the same sentence. While we're at it, let's throw in Groundhog Day. Not many people realize that Groundhog Day actually falls upon one of the major feast days of the Church: the Feast of the Presentation. Our Church has also called that day "Candlemas," or the "Purification of the Virgin."

I actually 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. That is where most 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 entities 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 "Candlemas," or "now" the Feast of the Presentation." According to tradition, the young child Jesus was to be presented in the Temple 40 days after his birth; other

traditions have called this same day the "Purification of the Virgin" (following Leviticus 12:2,6).

However, the tradition of "Candlemas" came closest to recognizing what is going on in our natural world. Whether they called it "Presentation" or "Purification," Christians lit candles on February 2. 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.

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 midwinter. 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 bellweather groundhogs across the United States saw their shadows on February 2 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 here at the Cathedral of St. Philip, we are celebrating the light of the world. On Wednesday, February 2, we were celebrating the Grand Opening Night of the Cathedral Antiques Show, our fortieth year. The Episcopal Church Women have brought light to the world in that ministry.

And, today, just as people are making one last run to the grocery store, stocking up for the Super Bowl game, the Cathedral will be observing Candlemas and the Presentation. We will begin our choral eucharist, at 4 p.m. today, with a grand Candlemas procession. We will be bringing light to the world.

Yes, it is still wintertime; but this week the 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 economy is bleak right now. But God has turned us toward light, toward health.

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

Jesus 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.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip