
Behold the Light

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
The Feast of the Presentation – Year A**

During this sermon, acolytes and ushers will be lighting the candles you received on your way in. We will keep them lighted through candle blessing, during the Parish Notices. These candles are the sermon today. They signify the light of Christ. Symbols, images, metaphors, sacraments and rituals: these are the language of mystery—language that speaks not only to our minds, but also to our hearts, bodies, and souls.

But this is a sermon, and you likely expect to hear some words. So I will offer some. But as I do, I hope you will *listen to the light*. Pay attention to the candle you're holding. Pay attention to the way the flame glows, and warms, and dances. Pay attention to what it illumines for you: your hand, or the words in your leaflet, or the face of the person next to you. Watch the light spread among us. It's a wonder, isn't it?

Notice also all the other candles in our worship. There are the candles lining the aisle, and the torches that accompanied the Gospel a moment ago. There are also the torches that the acolytes carried in our opening procession, leading, lighting the way as we gathered—and that will lead us out again into the world, to continue our service there.

There are the votive candles, here: candles we light in offering, of prayer, or intention, or remembrance.

There are the altar candles. And the Paschal candle that we blessed, and first lighted, in the wee, dark hours of Easter morning, from the new fire, built and tended by our Scout troop for our Easter Vigil. From this one candle, light passed from person to person. We followed that light, and carried it, into the very dark church.

For those of us accustomed to conjuring a flood of light with the flip of a switch, that may be the closest we come to appreciating the role that candles played in earlier churches, before electricity. Without them, you couldn't see your way around the dark church, or around the altar. You couldn't see the gospel to read it. Without a burning flame, you were cold.

Still, we do know darkness, don't we? We know what it is to not be able to see—to not be able to see a way forward, or a way out. We know the perils and dangers of the night, and the longing for light. For warmth. For new life.

We need light. We need light, as much as ever. We need the light of Christ, as much as ever. So we use candles, still. They help us remember and embody the light and the story of Christ. Indeed, one way to tell that story is to trace the ways we use light through the church year.

It begins in the cold of winter, in the deep-blue darkness of Advent. As we wait for the coming of Christ, we keep vigil with an Advent wreath, lighting first one candle, then two, then three, then four, as we draw closer to and closer to Christmas.

And then, lo and behold, a light shines in the darkness! On a dark, silent and holy night, *Christ the savior is born: Son of God, love's pure light radiant, beams, from thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace.*

That is from *Silent Night*, of course, the carol we sing on Christmas Eve, as we light candles again, in celebration of the eternal light of God becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ, and dwelling and growing among us.

Twelve days later, as the prophets foretold, nations stream to this light, in the form of three kings of the orient.

Guided by a star of wonder, star of light, they finally come to the perfect light, the Christ child, and offer him their gifts. It is the Feast of the Epiphany!

Then the holidays are really over; and winter lingers; and the long year of January carries on, and on. Just then, when our Christmas candles have burned to a stub, and spring is as impatient as we are for its arrival, we pull out new candles for blessing. And we light them. And we watch the light grow, again, from one small flame.

Why? Because forty days after Jesus' birth, his parents presented him at the Temple, as was the Jewish custom. And a righteous and devout old man named Simeon, who had been waiting and praying and looking forward to the consolation of Israel, saw the light in Jesus and praised and blessed him, calling him "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." *That* is why we bless and light candles on this Feast of the Presentation, also known as Candlemas.

The story continues, of course, through the dry desert of Lent, and the dark desolation of Good Friday and Holy Saturday, when the light of Christ was snuffed out, and with it, all the candles in the church. But then, *Alleluia!*, *Christ is risen!* The light rises and shines, again, three days later. Not even death can put it out.

That same light of Christ shines into darkness, again and again, and accompanies and comforts and leads us through the night. That same light of Christ is in your hand, and in you, and in your neighbor. It is in us, and in others. And for others. The light of Christ is for the world. By it, we see God's love for the whole world.

The light of Christ that is in us is for the world, too. We spread it abroad by letting Christ shine through us--through our good works, our service, our small and great acts of kindness, our stubborn faith and hope and love. And we spread it by looking for and blessing the light that shines in others—and by watching it grow as we give it away.