

Candle-Light

As I told the children earlier, tomorrow will be celebrated in many churches as Candlemas, also known as the Feast of the Purification or the Feast of the Presentation. Yes, I know it's Groundhog Day, too. I also remember it as the birthday of Red Schoendienst, who managed my beloved Cardinals for most of my early life and of my high school French teacher, Mlle. Jill Patrick, who, like me, was also a member of Kirkwood Baptist Church, which I think got me a little leeway from time to time in her class. But it's Candlemas I want to talk about today – its history as a Christian feast, why it intrigues me and, most importantly, the lessons that the imagery and story of the day have for us now.

As I also told the children, the observance of the Feast of the Presentation or Purification became associated with candles because of Simeon's pronouncement about Jesus: "my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a *light* for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." Very early in Christian history, people began holding candle-lit processions into worship forty days after Christmas to celebrate the coming of Jesus, the Light of the World, into the Temple. Later, the custom grew to include the donation of candles to the church for the upcoming year and the blessing of beeswax candles to go back into the homes of Christians to be used at special times, such as a birth or death in the house, so that the arriving or departing soul might be welcomed or sent out with the purest light available – an earthly reflection of the light of Christ. Because of the timing of Candlemas in the seasons of the year in the Northern Hemisphere, roughly half-way between the Winter Solstice and the Vernal Equinox, the day also became an important marker for agricultural endeavors. The day's timing as regards the sun's cycle also connected it to folk lore. In England, the traditional saying was:

*If Candlemas be fair and bright,
Come winter, have another flight;
If Candlemas bring clouds and rain,
Go winter, and come not again.*

In Germany, where there were still bears in the forests, folk wisdom had it that the bears would interrupt their hibernations on Candlemas to see if the weather was fair (so that they could expect more hibernation weather ahead) or foul (meaning spring was at hand). Some of the descendants of those superstitious Germans migrated to America (we know them as the Pennsylvania Dutch), including to the little town of Punxatawney, where their old tradition about the bears was transferred to the less fearsome groundhog. So when you hear about Punxatawney Phil and his shadow tomorrow, remember that the tradition grew out of the Christian observance of Candlemas and think of old Simeon and his proclamation of the infant Jesus as God's Light.

We don't celebrate Candlemas much in this country but as a voracious reader as a child, I often encountered references to it and other mysterious holidays in reading works by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling, Shakespeare and others. If you've read much British literature, you've probably found yourself wondering about Candlemas, Michaelmas, St. Swithen's Day, St. Crispin's Day, and others. As I dug into this subject, I also found that I remembered references to Simeon's words in many things that I'd read and heard. In T.H. White's The Once and Future King, Merlin repeats the first part of Simeon's words when Arthur establishes the code of chivalry for the Round Table knights. When he makes his knights swear to use their strength only for good, Arthur fulfills Merlin's expectations of him as a student and Merlin is released from his voluntary bondage as Arthur's tutor. There are similar usages in two of the classics of science fiction, Karel Capek's play, *RUR*, and Walter Miller's novel, A Canticle for Leibowitz.

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And if you grew up Anglican, Lutheran or Catholic, you might have heard a more ceremonial version of Simeon's words at a Compline service or after communion on a regular basis:
Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace : according to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen : thy salvation,
Which thou hast prepared : before the face of all people;
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles : and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

“A light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel...” As I think of those words today, I am reminded what a different relationship we have with physical light than Simeon and his peers had; different even than people in this country as late as the middle of the last century. If we think it's too dark in a room, we simply flip a switch and have plenty of light. Earlier this week, responding to years of complaints about the lighting in this room, John Naig replaced 60w incandescent lamps, giving off 850 lumens each, with 23w CFLs, giving off 1600 lumens each, 12.5 lumens being roughly equivalent to the light given off by one candle. Just think of it! All those lights around the perimeter of the Sanctuary are each the equivalent of 128 candles! What a luxury just one of those lamps would have been in millennia of human history.

A few weeks ago, we had a power outage at our house one night. We scrambled around with flashlights and candles, getting the place ready in case the power should stay out all night, setting up alternate alarm clocks and preparing to move Connie and me into the extra bedroom – a heated waterbed gets mighty cold mighty fast when the electricity goes out. Once all the necessities were taken care of, I gathered all the candles I could find and set them up in our living room and lit them and sat down to read. It wasn't the kind of reading light I'm used to but it was warm and relaxing and I could read well enough. About 20 minutes later, the electricity came back on and all the brightness and the sound of televisions and radios coming back on shattered the mood. But I remembered the quality of that flickering light and how well I was really able to cope with it. I couldn't see perfectly but I could see well enough.

As I think of that flickering light, I think of Simeon and Anna, of Mary and Joseph, of the infant Jesus and their meeting in the Temple. Jesus was just a baby, the weakest and most vulnerable of human beings, not yet the brilliant prophetic teacher, never to be the kind of warrior-king that most faithful Israelites expected God's Messiah to be. Under the harsh glare of the Jerusalem sun, the brilliant light reflected off the precious metal and jewels in the accoutrements of Temple worship, the dangerous glints of light off the steel of Roman swords and spears, the light of one little baby could have only been the merest flicker. But Simeon saw it and recognized it for what it was and is: “A light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of (God's) people Israel...” The light that Jesus brought, the light that Jesus was, wasn't a blinding, overpowering light, except for Paul and perhaps a few others. It is a warm and inviting light. It does not subdue, but beckons.

As I think of the candles of Candlemas, I think of the other flickering lights in this story. There were Joseph and Mary, for example, doing the best they knew how to do with the flickering light available to them. They were young parents, a long way from home and guidance, but they did what they knew to do. They followed the dictates of God's Law, which they believed to be holy. They circumcised and named the child, Luke tells us, calling him “Jesus” as the angel had instructed. On the fortieth day after his birth, Mary came to the Temple for her ritual

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purification, bringing the sacrifice specified for a poor woman of two doves. Their firstborn son was dedicated to God on that same day. There was a lot they didn't know yet about being parents, a lot they didn't know about their special child. They were on an uncertain journey, just as all new parents are, with only a flickering light to guide them. But what they knew how to do, they were faithful to do. Luke tells us at the end of this reading that "the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom." He wants us to understand, I think, that this was in part, at least, due to the faithful efforts of his parents. Speculating on the source of this story, the Lutheran pastor Samuel Zumwalt writes, "Looking back on her life and on the joy and pain of being the Mother of God, the Virgin Mary tells Luke intimate details that describe the pious home life and spiritual nurture that shaped and molded the Savior of the world. All of which serves as a kind of encouragement to parents who would raise their own children as followers of her Son." For despite all the advancements in medicine and psychology and all the books and TV shows on child rearing, which of us parents really begin the journey of raising children with more than a flickering light, just a vague knowledge and a hope of what we need to do to guide our offspring into the world as good and faithful people? My friends, if you are someone who nurtures or has nurtured children, then hear the good news of Candlemas for you – God provides us with just the amount of light that we need for the journey.

As I think of the flickering candles of Candlemas, I also think of those two prophetic senior citizens, Simeon and Anna. Their steps may have been halting, but they still were at the Temple every day to give praise to God. Their sight may have been dimmed but they could still see the flickering light of God's promise in the tiny child that day. To quote again from Rev. Zumwalt, "Simeon and Anna are role models for elderly saints today whom God has not yet called from this life. They are embodiments of what is possible when eyes and ears are tuned not to the disappointments and heartaches of this life but to the hopes and promises that God offers to all who put their trust in Him. Others may show bitterness and cynicism or the yielding to depression and world-weariness but not Simeon and Anna." They must have known that they would not live to see the promise of this child come to fruition. Simeon in particular is now ready for death. His prayer, one of the great Canticles of the Bible, is known by its first two words in Latin, *Nunc Dimittis*, "now you are releasing me." As I think of Simeon and Anna, their aged eyes gazing into the far-off, flickering future, I think of other prophets who have foretold the coming of God's Kingdom with joy, despite knowing that they would not see it in their lives. If you'll allow me, one more time, to quote what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said on the day before he was killed: "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!" Martin Luther King saw the future, for all God's people, through the flickering candlelight of faith.

The infant, the young parents, the elders of the faith – each of these came together that day to show and to act on and to proclaim God's light. Part of the lesson of Candlemas for us is that our flickering lights are so much stronger, capable of bringing so much more light to the world, when we are together and not separated. Each of us must be ready to see and embrace the light that the other brings. We must be ready to hear the accumulated wisdom of those who are longer

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in the faith and in this life than we. We must be ready to embrace the energy and new understandings of those who are younger than ourselves. None of us bears the full light; all bear some light. We must pay loving attention to each other because with our flickering candles we see as through a glass, darkly. We must reach out across theologies and worship styles, across gender and culture, across generations and educational levels, to learn from each other, to be subject to one another, to bring our flickering candles together into one great beacon to light the place where God has put us. We are the Body of Christ and no part is unimportant.

No part is unimportant. No flickering candle's light is insignificant. Simeon recognized the promised salvation of Israel by God in a tiny baby. I mentioned earlier that his words have been used for centuries in services of Compline, the prayer at the end of the day. Used in that way, they are an invitation to the believer to consider the events of the day, great and small and to see in them the revealed grace of God. When we peer through the flickering light of faith, we may see the face of God in those we have met and in those who are most familiar to us. As we look across our day with the prophetic sight of Simeon, we may see the tiny turns of each day that bring us closer to God's Beloved Community, the small forgivenesses and blessings and acts of great love that come to us from those around us.

And, as I mentioned before, Simeon's words are often used in worship following communion. It takes a Simeon-kind of faith to see through the flickering light provided to us that these morsels of bread and thimbles of grape juice are powerful memorials of the broken body and shed blood of Jesus, the Messiah of God. But that kind of faith has been given to us. It takes an Anna-kind of fortitude to be sustained, month after month, year after year, on the hope that is whispered by this simple ceremony. But that hope and that fortitude are ours, by the grace of Christ Jesus. It takes a Mary-and-Joseph-kind of faithfulness to follow the flickering light of righteousness in the midst of an overwhelming situation in an often-hostile environment. But that faithfulness is ours by the gift of the Holy Spirit. And the strong and warm and loving light of God's own Son enters into our lives every day as we allow Him, healing and changing and leading us home. For that light, the light and the glory that we celebrate on Candlemas and on every ordinary, flickering day, thanks be to God.