

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, 5 February 2023

Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR

The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

In the Name of Christ, the light of the world. We are still in the season of Epiphany, basking in the light that Christ brings into the world, and exploring the many ways we can see it. Some years of the lectionary the light is manifest in a sequence of Jesus' acts, especially various sorts of healing and teaching after the visit of the Magi and the revelation of Jesus' baptism. This year's readings are more about revelation through Jesus' teaching.

Today Jesus is talking about us. We are included with the first hearers who followed him about Galilee. Jesus tells us that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world – definitely encouraging words. People in Jesus' time and ours are often asking, "What is God going to do for us, for the world?" And Jesus tells us that we are the salt that flavors and preserves the nourishment we all need. And in terms of the light of Epiphany, we are the light. We are light bearers and lights in ourselves, though we often lose sight of that fact and the calling it entails. Jesus clearly recognizes that most of us ordinary mortals find it hard to think of ourselves as the ones who bring light and hope and healing into the world, and acknowledges that the savor and light which we have within us can become ineffective and invisible if we do not recognize it and accept that this is our nature and our calling.

It is a great help to begin with our first reading from Isaiah, which includes some of my favorite words of scripture, lines that point us forward to our Lenten time of self-examination. God asks, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke ...?" The readings continue to answer last week's question: "What does God want from us?"

Isaiah and Paul and Jesus tell us that the Epiphany light, the light of revelation is born by us in our lives today. How we live our lives, how we open our hearts to the people around us – that is where the light shines. God's light was incarnate in Christ, and we are incorporated into the body of Christ, in order to give that light to the world.

One of the benefits of focusing on light, rather than words like truth and hope, is that it can be less abstract, more practical. It is very straight forward. If we are the light as Jesus says, then we illuminate the world we inhabit, we make a difference to the people we encounter, each in our own unique way.

Isaiah emphasizes the light that reveals the suffering around us and does something about it. Isaiah is again scolding the religious leaders of his day, reminding them that offering sacrifices to God in the temple is not sufficient to be God's people. What is expected is having open eyes to see the suffering in the world and the causes of that suffering – and then to do something to alleviate the suffering. The light reveals what is wrong in the world and lets us all see clearly enough to do something about it. It could be a smile to a lonely person, a thank you to someone who opens a door, or something bigger like giving someone a week's groceries or a month's rent or a couch to sleep on, or helping to build needed housing.

Isaiah reminds us that God's light in us shines from us to help us and everyone else see the needs around us and to see how those needs can be met. The light shows different things in different situations, but always it brings hope – and it draws us together in community.

Paul in turn speaks of God's spirit that has been given to us to show us the truth about God and the truth about our relationship with God, all revealed in the sacrifice of Christ, the ultimate self-offering for the benefit of all.

This Thursday was the Feast most commonly called Candlemas, a bright light in this time of Epiphany, the 40th day of celebrating Christ come among us. On this feast we are figuratively at the top of the mountain, going from one revelation after another since the birth at Christmas, now ready to begin the slow descent toward the Crucifixion. I like to follow of the old northern European custom of keeping some of my Christmas decorations until Candlemas when the celebration finally ends and we begin getting ready to go into the wilderness of Lent. This is the perfect time to focus once more on light and to bless all the lights of our worship for the coming year.

So we are incorporating a little of the Candlemas celebration into our worship today and following the ancient custom of blessing all the candles (including the liquid wax for our most modern candles) that will light our worship in the coming year. Jesus tells us that we are the light of the world, but we ourselves need light and hope and companionship to fulfill that calling.

For us in our electrified world, candles still represent light to see by, but a particular light, a light which makes things more special, a light which calls us to quiet and attention. So we have candles at dinner, especially when it is a festive occasion; we have candles for romance; we have candles for prayer; we have candles for peace; we have candles to remember the dead.

We bless our candles today to recall that day when the light of Christ came into God's Temple and the world changed. Simeon and Anna, two people who had lived for decades in service to God's people, always looking for God to come among them, recognized in this 40-day-old baby boy the promised one, the fulfillment of all that Isaiah had spoken about. Simeon bursts forth with a beautiful canticle of praise because God has kept a promise that Simeon would live to see this day. And Anna goes out to tell everyone who will listen about the light they have seen in this baby.

The light of Christ shone in the temple that day and so we invite the light of Christ into our holy places and into the sanctuary of our hearts, to bring wisdom and courage and peace. We ask God to bless us and all these lights so that, like Anna, we can go forth as light bearers, as Christ bearers into a world of great darkness.

Today I have a handout of my personal favorite Candlemas reflection. It is a poem written by the monk Thomas Merton in 1943, in the dark of the Second World War. It speaks eloquently of the symbolism of coming with candles to be blessed and being blessed ourselves as candles for God whose lives will give comfort to the suffering and light to the world. I love to join in looking at the candles as he describes them being slowly consumed by the flame, freely giving their lives, and imagining ourselves, lights for the world, giving of ourselves freely and continually until our last breath when our work is done and our light disappears into the greater light of Christ.

So join me in imagining that we are in the dark of an ancient church, each carrying our own candle in procession, and praying in the words of Merton.

Let us pray.

Look kindly, Jesus, where we come,

New Simeons, to kindle,

Each at Your infant sacrifice his own life's candle.

And when Your flame turns into many tongues,

See how the One is multiplied, among us, hundreds!

And goes among the humble, and consoles our sinful kindred.

It is for this we come,

And, kneeling, each receive one flame:

Our lives, like candles, spell this simple symbol:

Weep like our bodily life, sweet work of bees,

Sweeten the world, with your slow sacrifice.

And this shall be our praise:

That by our glad expense, our Father's will

Burned and consumed us for a parable.

Nor burn we now with brown and smoky flames, but bright

Until our sacrifice is done,

(By which not we, but You are known)

And then, returning to our Father, one by one,

Give back our lives like wise and waxen lights. Amen.