



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, February 2, 2020
The Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ

Candlemas Procession and Solemn Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Malachi 3:1-4, Hebrews 2:14-18, and Luke 2:22-40
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A light shine in the darkness.

Are you feeling SAD today? I don't mean melancholy, I mean SAD? According to the Associate Professor of neurology and psychiatry and director of the Sleep Disorders Center at the School of Medicine at Boston University, 10 million Americans are affected by Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD, bringing on mood changes, symptoms of depression, lethargy, and changes in eating habits. It seems that short days, long nights, and lack of sunshine significantly contribute to feeling pretty miserable in the winter. I loved the answer the professor gave to the question "Are there ways to prevent SAD or mitigate its symptoms?" "Start treating it before it happens," he said, "or, in winter, move down to South America!"

In the bible, depression is regularly associated with darkness; the prophets describe impending disaster as deep gloom or a funeral shroud covering the people. Darkness is also the time when bad things happen – the thief comes while the householder is asleep; the enemy steels into the city under the cover of darkness; Judas leaves the last supper when it is night; Jesus is in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane and is arrested in the darkness. This is more than a seasonal disorder; this kind of darkness signifies oppression and the struggle with evil. And everyone is susceptible to it; even the great saints of the church have talk about their own dark nights of the souls – smiling Mother Teresa of Calcutta among them. St Thérèse of Lisieux describes this most vividly in her diary:

"When, weary of being enveloped by nothing but darkness, I try to comfort and encourage myself with the thoughts of the eternal life to come, it only makes matters worse. The very darkness seems to echo

the voices of those who do not believe, and mocks at me: "You dream of light and of a fragrant land; you dream that the creator of this loveliness will be your own for all eternity; you dream of escaping one day from these mists in which you languish! Dream on, welcome death; it will not bring you what you hope; it will bring an even darker night, the night of nothingness!" (Story of a soul, Chapter IX)

Not the most cheerful entry in her diary!

However, far from that disturbing us, I want to suggest that it can actually give us hope. If the dark night of the soul is experienced by the very people that are close to God and searching for a deeper relationship with him, then what does that say about our God? It says this: Jesus, God's own son, experienced this very same darkness to take away its fear. In the letter to the Hebrews we heard these words:

"Since God's children share flesh and blood, Jesus himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death."

You see, my friends, when Jesus entered into the darkness, he also took away its power. The creative Word of God brought creation into being out of deep darkness by saying "Let there be light." As we shall say in the Nicene Creed in a few moments, *"God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made."* That same Word became flesh, entered into the darkness of sin and death, and poured his light into that darkness and despair, conquering even the darkness of the grave. How significant it is that the Gospels tell us that the Resurrection happened while it was still dark! What does St. Paul say to the Romans? *"The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."* (Romans 13:12-14)

This Candlemas celebration, coming for us while the days are still short and gloomy and when the nights are still long, is a sign of the Light of Christ bursting into the darkness of our lives. Simeon takes up the child Jesus and proclaims him as *"a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."* That is, Jesus is the one who will reveal to us the way the truth and the life; who will light that way for us and, in whom we see the glory of God made visible.

Jesus was presented in the Temple – a prefiguring of his sacrificial offering on the cross – a pure offering; sinless and undefiled and able to atone once and for all for the enormity of the insult that sin is in our lives and in our world. Jesus – priest and victim; the light of the world; the lamb of God; the glory of the Father - wishes to draw us back to the Father’s love and enlighten each one of us in the darkness of our own human condition.

Anna, the prophetess, must have known deep darkness. She was married seven years and then was widowed until she reached her great age of 84 years. All those years on her own...waiting. Some of you know exactly how dark that kind of waiting can be once you have lost a loved one or you are waiting for that loved one to die. And then, at the end of Anna’s long life, bursting into that darkness came the light of the world and the promise of hope.

At the end of this mass, we shall sing the Song of Simeon and kindle again these candle flames. When you look at your candle, remember that the brightness of the flame is also costly for, as the candle burns ever more brightly, it consumes itself until the wax is gone and the flame also. Jesus was presented in the Temple as the true light and, to the world, it looked as if *that* life would also be consumed and expended. Only, for Jesus, his death became a new beginning and the one who is the light shone ever more brightly with the radiance of God’s love.

And, because that Light has not been extinguished, there is hope for us in our darkness and our darkness can be flooded with eternal light. What could be a sad existence, becomes a life charged with possibility and filled with grace. As Archbishop Rowan Williams once said: *“Light kindles light and flame kindles flame. When God sets the world on fire with his love, in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus and the giving of the Holy Spirit, there isn’t any less of God at the end of the process, but there’s a lot more of us.”*