

Sermon, 2/6/2022 (Feast of the Presentation/Candlemas transferred)

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Readings at [https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearABC RCL/HolyDays/Present RCL.html](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearABC/RCL/HolyDays/Present/RCL.html)

Thus says the Lord, See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. **The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight-- indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?**

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

(Malachi 3)

For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham.
(Hebrews 2)

Each year around this time, near the midpoint of the season of Epiphany, the Church throughout the world celebrates the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, also known in the English-speaking world as Candlemas. Each year, we move through the Season of Epiphany yearning for enlightenment– enlightenment of the long, cold winter nights, to be sure, but we also yearn for the enlightenment of our minds, of our hearts, of our Church, of our world. The Season of Epiphany holds the promise that we might always become at least a little more enlightened– more enlightened about and more enlightened by Jesus, the Light of the World. And so, it is fitting that, in the midst of this season, we take a moment in church to bless our candles for use throughout the year. And, God Bless our Altar Guild, I for one plan to burn a LOT of candles! You may have noticed that I really love candles. I love to burn candles, not because I think the Altar Guild needs any more work to keep them busy. I love to burn candles because I deeply believe that...

Whenever and wherever these candles burn, whether here in the church or in our homes, these candles offer us a visible, tangible, physical, sacramental reminder of the eternal divine light that burns, before us and above us within us and among us. Jesus, the Light of the world. A light to reveal the inner thoughts of many. A light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel. The Light that is Life of all people. The Light that shines in the darkness and the darkness **does not** overwhelm it.

Of course, the beautiful light of a burning candle is not without some cost (as anyone who has ever tried to get spilled wax out of the carpet, or altar cloth or vestments can tell you). Nor is the beautiful light of a burning candle without some risk. I remember one

Christmas when I was a seminarian at All Souls Parish in Berkeley when one of the acolyte's hair caught fire. And one Easter baptism I celebrated at St. Thomas of Canterbury here in Albuquerque...when I lifted the Paschal Candle up out of its stand in order to bless the baptismal waters in the font and sloshed hot wax over my own head and face! Or every Wednesday, during chapel time with our Primary Class at St. Mark's Montessori School, when we pass the burning votive candle around the circle —well let's just say that there are more than a few moments each week when Deacon David and I are definitely holding our breath. You can see in the faces and body language of the children passing the candle a struggle that dwells within each of us—a struggle between our urge to draw near to the flame, and our urge to shy away. The flame of the candle both enchants, and it frightens. As well it should.

It is a true fact that Fire warms. AND fire burns. It is a true fact that Light enables us to see *everything* more clearly—the good AND the bad, the beautiful AND the ugly, the glorious and the terrible, alike.

We see something of this ambivalence, this struggle, this tension that is inherent in our relationship, as humans, with fire (and with God) in today's first lesson from the prophet, Malachi...

*Thus says the Lord, See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight-- indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. **[There is the hope, the allure, the DELIGHT]***

*But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire ... **[AND there, along with it, is THE TERROR]***

Like that precious and precarious moment each week in children's chapel, a moment at once pregnant with danger and delight, as the burning candle makes its way around the circle and comes to rest in each pair of tiny hands, in turn; so, it is with the moment of Lord's coming to God's people, according to the prophet. Precious and precarious. Pregnant with delight, and also with danger.

We should note that, for the prophet Malachi, and for his first audience, "the coming of the Lord to his temple" pointed towards the literal return of God's glory—also known as the Shekinah— to the Jewish Temple of Jerusalem. And, for the prophet and his first audience, the refining fire that would accompany God's presence would come to purify the "descendants of Levi", that is, the official priesthood designated to serve in that Temple and make acceptable offerings to God on behalf of the people of Israel.

But as we at St. Mark's hear this text today, some 2 ½ millennia and 12,000 km removed from that first audience, **we** might understand the meaning of the prophet's words more broadly. As Christians, we might understand the Temple to refer, not only to an ancient physical edifice in the city of Jerusalem, but also to **us**...both as individuals and as a community.

As we hear in 1 Corinthians: "*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ...For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.*" (1 Corinthians 3:16-17)

Likewise, we might understand the priesthood that must be purified to refer, not only to the descendants of the tribe of Levi, the official ancient priesthood of the Jerusalem Temple, but also to **us**, ...both as individuals and as a community.

As we hear in 1 Peter: "*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people,* in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*" (1 Peter 2:9)

And so, when we hear the prophet say:

The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight-- indeed, he is coming. The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.

We hear the promise that the Lord whom we seek, the Light in whom we delight will indeed suddenly come to US.

And when we hear the prophet say that:

he is like a refiner's fire... he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the priests and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.

We hear the promise and the warning that our Lord, our Light, will come to us with fire, to refine us and purify us so that we can more faithfully perform the work God has given us to do.

We hear in this promise a warning. But we should not mistake this warning for a threat. For the fire of God comes, not to destroy, but to refine. Not to punish, but to purify. The fire comes, not to consume what is worthless, but to bring to perfection that which is already of inestimable beauty and worth.

Our failure to achieve perfection, our continual need for further enlightenment and purification and refinement, is no cause for fear and no cause for shame. For, as the author of Hebrews puts it so plainly in today's second lesson: "*...it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham.*" (Hebrews 2). We are only human. Beloved and precious but imperfect and flawed. This human life, our baptized life, is an ongoing journey of transformation to reflect more clearly the image and likeness of Christ. And God sends light and fire to aid us on that journey.

This past Wednesday I had the unlikely opportunity to be interviewed here at the church by a senior producer from Fox News regarding my perspective on some proposed changes to the Social Studies Standards in New Mexico public schools. I was pleased for the chance to speak in enthusiastic support of these proposed changes, which I believe have the potential to help students in New Mexico receive a more robust, comprehensive social studies education—and to have a more thorough understanding of history, including the tools to better understand the complicated history of race and power relations in our country, to more constructively engage the tremendously diverse people and perspectives that are our among our country’s greatest assets, and to more effectively lead our country towards a future of peace, justice, and thriving for *all*.

It turns out I was the *ONLY* person this journalist had been able to find who was willing to speak to him *in support* of these changes. All his other interviewees spoke against these changes. I am sure that there are a variety of reasons that some—perhaps even many—people are opposed to this move towards a more expansive curriculum.

But I suspect that one major factor—and the one relevant to the sermon today—is a deep-seated fear of fire. A fear that we—or our children, or our country; our illusions, or our ideas, or our idols—won’t be able to bear the coming of the Light. The fear that the flame that comes to illuminate us, to refine us, to purify and transform our imperfections will, instead, destroy us.

And that fear is *not entirely* unfounded. The Light *WILL* reveal things we don’t want to see, alongside the things that we do. And Fire demands that we treat it with reverence and care so that it can warm and refine, and *not burn* or destroy.

Holding the fire with reverence and care may not be easy, as our preschoolers remind us each week. But they also show us this: Even though it may not be *easy*, but it can *absolutely* be done.

Later in today’s service we will pause to bless these candles. To set them aside for a holy purpose.

This is their purpose. This is my prayer: that whenever and wherever we see it, the burning flame of these candles will remind us of A promise. A warning. An invitation. A question.

Will we shy away, or will we delight in the Light?

Will we draw back in fear, or will we open ourselves to the purifying flame?

Will we turn our backs on the fire within and among us, until it grows to a raging inferno that we cannot ignore?

Or will we reach out to receive the refining fire with awe and humility...with some fear and great gratitude? Will we hold it with reverence? And treat it with care?

Will we allow Jesus, the Light of the World, to illuminate us?

Will **we** live as God's holy priesthood, trusting that we are of more worth and beauty than silver or gold, trusting that we can withstand the light and the heat of God's fire, trusting that the light and fire of God come to us, not to destroy, but to refine. Amen.