
The Feast of the Presentation and Light for A New Year

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Rev. Sam Candler**

As some of you know, I love this week of the year, the first week of February. Almost always, we in the United States of America seem to observe three different sorts of feasts, sometimes on the same day! In the formal Christian Church, February 2 is the Feast of the Presentation; but many Americans are more familiar with that day as Groundhog Day! What could they have in common?

The third “feast” day of the week, usually on the first Sunday in February, is the Super Bowl! Surely that event, even in this pandemic-quarantined-socially distanced way, ranks as one of America’s great “civic feasts.”

I actually believe that all these events have something in common, maybe especially this year. They are ways that our community, our civilization, hopes for life and yearns for light in the midst of winter.

Consider, for instance, the Super Bowl gatherings, the parties, the festivities around Sunday night. The gatherings will be much smaller this year (I hope!), but this is ritual at its most primordial. In a usual year, people plan schedules and change behavior and spend their resources for this event; in my book, this behavior is exactly the definition of a religion. The entities that change your schedules and order your lives and to which you offer your money are usually what we call “gods.” It’s a religion. This year, we might even be setting up our smaller household gatherings all the while remembering what times were like in the past! That, too, is religion. I will not dwell on its low points today. But, at its best, “Super Bowl Religion” shows us the fruit of sports discipline and athletic respect (and sometimes even advertising creativity, for those advertising).

The Super Bowl usually falls right in the middle of winter (in North America). So does February 2, which is the Feast of the Presentation. The day falls almost exactly midway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. Though winter “begins,” officially, on December 21, it is rarely as cold then as it is in the middle of winter – about February 2. Thus, our ancestors realized and devised all sorts of mid-winter feasts and festivals to remind them that spring was coming.

Christians began to observe this mid-winter day as “the Purification,” or “Candlemas,” or—now—“the Feast of the Presentation.” According to tradition, the young child Jesus was to be presented in the Temple 40 days after his birth.

However, the tradition of “Candlemas” came closest to recognizing what is going on in our natural world. Whether they called it “Presentation” or “Purification,” Christians lit candles on February 2. On this day, at Christian churches across the world, people usually light candles and walk in procession; they walk toward the light, even in the deep mid-winter.

Something in our human condition will always long and lean for light. We yearn for its energy, especially when we miss it the most – in the bleak midwinter. And this year, of course, we miss the light even more.

Somehow or another, strangely enough, our secular Groundhog Day is also associated with the longing for this light. We are wondering just how long it will be before spring comes. Will the groundhog see his shadow or not? Is there sunshine on Groundhog Day—too early—or not? (And: has this whole last year been one long Groundhog Day?!)

I have no idea what all the bellwether groundhogs across the United States saw on this February 2 or not. And, no matter who actually wins the Super Bowl this Sunday, all of our country is strangely warmed on Super


Bowl Sunday either gathering in parties, or watching the festivities in remembrance of parties past.

But in the Christian Church, we celebrate the light of the world in the first week of February. Some Christians will light every candle they can find, a ritual that symbolizes the Light of Christ in the world.

It is still wintertime. The coronavirus is still with us, too. But on February 2 our world turns toward spring. Yes, there will be more cold snaps. There may even be an ice storm. But the earth has now turned around the sun toward spring. The Church hopes the same thing about life today. The coronavirus is still quite serious. Vaccines are available for some, but not for everyone yet. Perhaps our own health is bad right now. Perhaps our economy still seems bleak right now. But God has turned us toward light, toward health.

I encourage us, then, to present ourselves to this God of Light. Like Mary and Joseph, present yourselves and your offspring to God in the holy temple today. Go to that place which has preserved and proclaimed light even during the darkest times. Light your candles this week, either literally or figuratively.

One of great ways that Jesus described himself was the Light, the Light of the world. But Jesus also told us that we, we ourselves, are the light of the world. It's not Groundhog Day or Super Bowl Sunday that brings true light to the world. It's not even the great traditions and customs of the church, though each of those events plays its part. The true light is us—you and me—and how we behave during all these events. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world; let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16).

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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