

March 15, 2023 – Genesis 1:1-5, Ephesians 5:1-2, 8-14, & John 8:12-18

“Receive this burning light to show that you have received Christ who is the Light of the world. Live always in the light of Christ, and be ever watchful for His coming, that you may meet Him with joy and enter with Him into the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom, which shall have no end.”

The ritual of giving a lit candle to the newly baptized is an ancient practice of the church. It goes back to at least 300 A.D. That's the earliest we have a record of it happening. Which means it's probably even older than that. So for over 1700 years, the church has used baptismal candles.

But that really shouldn't surprise us. Because for about as long as that, the church has used lamps and candles in all sorts of different ways. The paschal candle to mark the Easter season and remember the resurrection of Christ. The eternal flame to signify a worship space dedicated to Word and Sacrament. The altar candles to designate the beginning and end of a worship service. These are all ancient practices.

And yet, as I was researching all these different historical uses for lamps and candles in the church, I stumbled across something interesting. It turns out that during the time of St Jerome there was actually a moment in the church's history when we almost rejected the use of candles. Banned them from worship.

The controversy, as I understand it, relates to those verses from Genesis that we read earlier. *“And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.”*

You see, some pastors back then had decided that candles were a rejection of natural daylight. That they were an attempt to overwhelm and replace the light that God provided with manmade light. And we should simply be content to worship by the light of the sun during the day, as God had designed the world to function.

St Jerome disagreed with them. The use of lamps and candles during worship was already an established practice by that point. One that actually derived from the Old Testament, with the lamp that burned in the Tabernacle and Temple. And one that Jerome felt was harmless as long as it was done in the right faith.

Interestingly, though, C.S. Lewis would later make a similar argument about the use of electric lights, which came into use during his lifetime. He, again, felt that they were an attempt to redefine what constitutes day and night using a manmade light source. And that we'd all be better off if we just let God determine the rhythm of when we sleep and when we wake, not Edison's newfangled invention.

I don't fully agree with either the ancient opponents of St Jerome or C.S. Lewis. But I do see the point they were trying to make. We take light for granted. It's just there. It's part of our lives. And since more light is usually better – unless you're trying to sleep – and since light is easier than ever to create, why not create as much of it as you can?

But God did create light. We pretend to create light through things like candles and electricity. But we're really just manipulating the creation given to us. Again, there's nothing particularly wrong with using God's creation to make a better home for ourselves. But like every other bit of matter and energy in this universe, God, the Father almighty, is truly the maker of heaven and earth, not us.

The same goes for the separation of light from the darkness. God did create Day and Night. God did create the day for work. He did create the night for rest. And science has found over and over and over again, that when we break that rhythm of daytime work and nighttime rest, we suffer for it. Our health suffers for it. Our communities suffer for it.

When the sun comes up, that is God telling you that it's time to work. When the sun goes down, that is God telling you that it's time to rest. And I don't know about you, but I am terrible at listening to those instructions. Good and helpful though they may be.

Physical light defines the rhythm of our physical existence. So it really shouldn't surprise us that spiritual light also defines the rhythm of our spiritual existence. Because there is very much such a thing as spiritual light.

We see it all over scripture. The Psalms talk about the spiritual light of God's Word. The Book of Proverbs talks about the spiritual light of wisdom. The prophets talk about the spiritual light of God's revelation and righteousness. Finally, in our Gospel lesson – and throughout John's Gospel in general – Jesus calls himself the light of the world. He who is the very light of life.

There is spiritual light. And just like physical light, it is created by God. It is a gift from him. We cannot create it for ourselves. We can't even pretend to create it by manipulating God's creation. It is entirely from him.

There is spiritual light and it is separated from spiritual darkness. But it's not separated in periods of day and night. No, it's separated into kingdoms of light and darkness. A kingdom of light, ruled by Christ, where there is no darkness at all. Where there is no light but Christ himself and his righteousness shining on everything and everyone.

And a kingdom of darkness, ruled by sin, death, and the devil. A kingdom that rejects the light of God's Law and so is enslaved to its own sinful flesh and passions. A kingdom where death and hell covers everything and everyone in fear and despair and shame.

Which makes you wonder why such a kingdom of darkness would even exist. I mean, as I mentioned before, we are always trying to create more physical light. We don't like physical darkness and so we are constantly coming up with new ways to extend the day and its light. So why don't we do that spiritually? Why doesn't every person run to the light of God's kingdom the moment they see it?

Well, for two reasons. First, there's the simple reality that the devil is really, really good at tempting us. The church father St Basil the Great once wrote, "Hell can't be made attractive, so the devil makes attractive the road that leads there."

Eternal spiritual darkness in hell is not attractive. It is a place of death and suffering and despair and the eternal condemnation of God almighty. There's nothing attractive about any of that. But, as he usually does, the devil is very good at misleading us with lies.

He doesn't show us the kingdom of darkness. He only shows us the works of darkness. The things you can do in the dark when no one can see you. The things that aren't in any way fruitful. The things that are, in fact, utterly dead. But boy do they feel good. By keeping us in the dark, he keeps us from seeing just how shameful the things we're doing are.

Which then leads to the second reason people remain in the kingdom of darkness: "*When anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible.*" Rejecting the darkness means stepping into the light and seeing all the things you did in the darkness. Stepping into the light and seeing what you became in the darkness.

It's not pretty. The fruit of darkness is ugly and dead. And if you don't look at the fruits of your sinfulness and feel ashamed and disgusted by your own thoughts, words, and deeds, well then you're probably not shining the light of God's Law on every part of you.

And yet, there's freedom in that light too. Because, as Jesus says, that light – His light – is the light of life. Or as Paul puts it, when the light of Christ shines on you, the sleeper awakes and rises from the dead.

To be in the light means to be free of the darkness. To be in the light means to be truly alive. No longer a captive to death. No longer afraid of the grave.

To be in the light of Christ means that everything you did in the dark is nailed to the cross and died with him. It's shameful and disgusting, yes. But it's also dead and gone. It has no power over you because it had no power over Christ. He put your sins to death when he died. He gave you new life when he rose from the dead.

"Receive this burning light to show that you have received Christ who is the Light of the world." You are baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. The old has passed away. The new has come. You are a child of light. For by water and the Word, you have received Christ who is the light of the world. Amen.