



From the Pulpit: December 5, 2021
Second Sunday of Advent

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

John 1:1–5, 14; Matthew 5:13–14

Certain Semi-Sacred Symbols of the Season, II: Candles

This Advent and Christmastide we're preaching a series of sermons called "Certain Semi-Sacred Symbols of the Season" including candles. The lesson for the day is a prologue of John chapter one:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

"In the beginning was the Word," writes St. John, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...In him was life, and the life is the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it."

"All the darkness
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a single candle."



The Prologue to John's Gospel is one of the most familiar and beloved passages in the entire Bible, but I am pretty sure that if John had submitted his epochal essay in partial fulfillment of the requirements for an M.Div. degree at Princeton Theological Seminary, his professor would have called him into her office and said, "You know, this is great work, Johnny, very poignant and persuasive. But you're mixing your metaphors. Is he the Word or the Light? Is your image aural or visual?"

And she'd be right about that. "In the Word was life, and the life is the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it." But we also know that words can illumine or obfuscate. They can shine or they can shadow. In the light of his singular life we see.

And so since that first Christmas, candles have been a Semi-Sacred Symbol of the Season. Candles are so simple and so common that we don't notice how sophisticated this technology really is. All they need to shine are tallow, wick, and match, but the hottest part of a candle flame is 2,550 degrees Fahrenheit.

The unaided human eye can see a candle flame from a mile and a half away. You've heard the old expression: "All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light of a single candle."

The English word 'candle' comes from the Latin verb *candere*, 'to shine.' Other English cognates from the Latin *candere* include 'chandelier,' 'incandescent,' 'candor' and 'candid,' because candid people do not hide their light under a bushel but let us know exactly what they think; and unexpectedly 'candidate,' because candidates for office at the ancient Roman Forum wore white togas which made them shine like a candle.

A lot of us put candles in every window of our homes at this time of year. They're usually electric, not flame, which seems wise, since even today, real candles are responsible for 6% of all fire fatalities around the world.

You know why we put candles in the windows? It's to show the way home for the ones we love who have been far from us but might be coming home for Christmas. It's so that your son, far away at Colgate since August, can take an Uber from O'Hare and when the driver turns on to your block, your son can tell him, "It's the one with all the candles in the windows," just before your glad reunion.

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Before the invention of neon signs, a candle in the window of the roadside inn meant that there was a bed available for the weary traveler. They were like a "Vacancy" sign.

There was no candle in the window of the Bethlehem Best Western when Joseph and Mary arrived there, which is why in many nativity paintings and creche scenes, Carpenter Joseph is often carrying a lantern, because his foster son was born at night, in the barn, and Joseph needed to illuminate the stable-cum-labor-and-delivery ward so that Mother Mary could deliver her son safely.



“In the Word is life, and the life is the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.” It’s a mixed metaphor, but words can shine.

Is anybody reading Erik Larson’s latest book, *The Splendid and the Vile*, about Winston Churchill during the Battle of Britain? It’s 1940; the nations of Europe have been mowed down, one after another, by the Wehrmacht threshing machine; east to west, first Poland, then the low countries, finally and shockingly France itself, with barely a shot fired. Britain is completely, utterly, desperately alone.

Churchill is entirely alone, all that stands between fascism and what’s left of the Free World. But he is very proud of his words. He knew he was the greatest orator of the twentieth century, perhaps one of the greatest of all times.

In a speech to France that Churchill himself delivers in **French**, he says, “This evil man, this monstrous abortion of hatred and defeat, is resolved on nothing less than the complete wiping out of the French nation, and the disintegration of its whole life and future.”¹

Do you notice his utter mastery of the language—that muscular, plain, monosyllabic Anglo-Saxon prose, which is so lucid (an adjective, by the way, that employs a visual metaphor, because ‘lucid language is words that help you see better).

It wasn’t all darkness and despair. In October of 1940, Sir Winston witnessed the birth of his grandson. They called him Winston, Jr., naturally. He was a big baby, round and robust. Someone said, “He looks just like his grandfather,” and of course, somebody else pointed out, “All babies look like Winston Churchill.”²

¹ Erik Larson, *The Splendid and the Vile: A Saga of Churchill, Family, and Defiance During the Blitz* (New York: Crown, 2020), p. 278.

² Larson, pp. 300–301.

He would win this war with his words over and over again. Mr. Larson repeats the story of the heroism of the Royal Air Force in the skies over London. The Prime Minister visits an RAF airfield and meets the brave pilots. He asks the Commander how they can win the Battle of Britain with so few planes, and the Commander says, “We will bring them back down, re-fuel, and go back up.”

“In dark days and darker nights... the incandescent quality of his words illuminated the courage of his countrymen.”
John F. Kennedy

Churchill is in awe. He goes back to his car and sits there in silence. One of his Major Generals turns to him to speak, and Churchill says, “Do not speak to me. I have never been so moved.” He sits there in silence for several more minutes and finally says, “Never in the history of mankind has so much been owed by so many to so few.”³

Churchill himself said, “If words count, we might win this war.”⁴ Yes? Words do count.

In 1963, President Kennedy and Congress named Winston Churchill an honorary citizen of the United States. In the entire history of the land, this honor has been conferred on only eight non-Americans, but Mr. Churchill was the first.

President Kennedy said, “In the dark days and darker nights, when England stood alone—and most men, save Englishmen, despaired of England’s life—Winston Churchill mobilized the English language and sent it into battle. The incandescent quality of his words illuminated the courage of his countrymen.”⁵

³ Larson, p. 171.

⁴ Larson, p. 78

⁵ John F. Kennedy, “Proclamation Conferring Honorary U.S. Citizenship on Sir Winston Churchill,” April 9, 1963, The Rose Garden at The White House, Washington, D.C.

Did you notice that President Kennedy mixed his metaphors just like St. John in the Prologue to his Gospel? “In dark days and darker nights...the incandescent quality of his words illuminated the courage of his countrymen.”

Well, what’s it going to be, President Kennedy? Is your image aural or visual? But it works, right? We know just what they meant—both Johns, the Evangelist and the President. Words count.

And THE WORD is the light by which we make our way through the darkness without stumbling and eventually find our way home.

—Prayers of the People—
By The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Holy God, O Gladsome, Joyous Light,

In a world that is both hard and holy, messy and miraculous, twice daily you reveal to us a measure of your magnificence when darkness and light embrace and the sky above us radiates with color. You lift our gaze to rejoice each dawn and in the starry, vesper light expand our imagination in wonder. By day we know the gifts of meaningful work to be done, the meeting of neighbors and strangers, and the warmth of your love. By night we know the gifts of time with loved ones, a space for dreams to emerge, and sacred rest.

Gathered here in your sanctuary aglow with glass and garland may we be formed and re-formed into the community you wish us to be. As we journey toward the manger and the mystery of love incarnate, may we be people of hope and makers of peace.

In Christ we understand that you know what it is like to live...

Where violence is common and the struggle for power is never ending.

Where there is not enough room and shelter is hard to find, when refuge is not guaranteed no matter how arduous the journey.

Where sorrow and suffering cannot be avoided.

In Christ we know your compassion, a comfort to our most tender experiences. Let our experience of your generous grace turn our hearts toward the needs of others. You know what it is like to be human. May we know what it is like to serve Christ in the world...

To make peace in our homes and communities bringing kindness and reconciliation to every corner where we live, learn, and labor.

To respond to the needs of others with increasing generosity, offering tangible relief for those in need.

To be bearers of hope, sitting attentively, being present with the ill, the grieving, and all who wait.

Meet us O God. Meet us in the gifts of the day and in the gifts of the night. Bring us to the joyous dawn. Bring us to the gladsome vesper light where your goodness and glory glimmer. Meet us O God, at the manger where heaven meets earth, where hard meets holy, where messy meets miraculous, to this child who will lead us, who will challenge us, and who teaches us to pray...

*You may use these prayers for non-commercial purposes in any medium, provided you include a brief credit line with the author’s name (if applicable) and a link to the original post.