

Sermon for EPIPHANY 2, YEAR A
January 15, 2023
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Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

- [Isaiah 49:1-7](#)
- [1 Corinthians 1:1-9](#)
- [John 1:29-42](#)
- [Psalm 40:1-12](#)

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be always acceptable in thy sight, o Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

When I drove home from the Cathedral after Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, I looked up and down the streets at the hundreds of luminarias (or farolitos, if you prefer) lining sidewalks and surrounding homes. Most all of the other electric lights had long since been turned off (after all, it was almost 1:00 in the morning), but the luminarias continued to glow. In fact, I was amazed at how much light emanated from these little paper bags with candles.

I think those of us who have lived in New Mexico for any length of time probably take luminarias for granted. Grocery stores and drug stores stock bundles of paper sacks and boxes of votive candles along with the displays of Christmas decorations and baking supplies. Most everyone knows that luminarias are more than a pretty decoration – they symbolically light the way for the Christ Child. But as I reflected on how luminarias are made, I realized that these little lanterns can actually teach us something about ourselves and our relationship with Christ.

Throughout the history of mankind, God always wanted to dwell with his people. If you will recall from the Book of Exodus, after the Israelites were led out of Egypt, God commanded Moses to construct the Tabernacle. This was basically a portable tent of meeting, and as they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, the Israelites carried the Tabernacle with them. Whenever they camped, God entered the Tabernacle and dwelled in it, and the people could see his presence as cloud and fire emanating from the Holy of Holies. In other words, God “tented” with his people. And whenever they broke camp and moved on, God would go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God was always present with his people, leading them and dwelling with them, but he was always separated from them.

If you were here on Christmas Day, you heard the Prologue to John’s Gospel. In it, John says that the Word of God, the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world, yet the world did not know him. And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us. Flesh here means the whole person, with all human frailty and vulnerability. God now dwelled among his people again – he “tented” with them again – in the person of Jesus. He walked with them; he ate with them; he touched them; he lived as one of them. He led them, and they followed him like they had followed the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. This time God was not separated

from his people – he was in the midst of them, and they had direct access to him – but this physical tent only remained on the earth for some 33 years. And now you are wondering what on earth this has to do with luminarias – little paper bags with candles in them.

I actually want to talk about candles for a moment. All of us have used candles in our homes at some point. Sometimes they serve a very practical purpose, such as when the power goes out; sometimes they set the mood or tone for a special occasion, such as a wedding or a special dinner; and sometimes they are purely decorative. But throughout the history of the church, candles have always had a deep symbolic meaning. The physical properties of the candle itself point to who Christ is and why he came among us. The wax of the candle is formed from the juice of flowers by the bee, and it signifies the flesh of Christ that he received from the Virgin Mary, his most pure Blessed Mother. The wick of the candle, which is within the wax and cannot be seen, symbolizes the human soul of Christ within his flesh. And the flame, which burns on top, is his divinity. The light of the candle is the light of Christ, who came to lighten our darkness. Then we have the Paschal candle, which is lit at the Great Vigil of Easter and which burns beside the baptismal font at every baptism. This candle is also a pillar, and it symbolizes the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire that led the Israelites. It reminds us that Christ always goes before us, leading us out of the bondage of sin and lighting for us the way of eternal life.

Luminarias contain candles, of course, but a luminaria is more than a candle. It is a simple paper bag, folded down at the top and filled with sand. And when the candle is placed inside, it glows and spreads the light. But when you look at a luminaria from the front or from the side, you don't actually see the candle. The source of the illumination is concealed, but the surface area of the bag collects the light from the candle, and that light becomes brighter and more uniform. Because of this property of physics, we actually see more light when looking at the bag than we see if we look at just the candle. And this light that is amplified through the bag is a soft light that illuminates everything around it. A lot of work goes into making those little lanterns, as I'm certain many of you know first-hand. Each bag must be opened up and the top folded over to keep it from collapsing. Sand must be added to each bag to anchor it and keep it from blowing away in the wind. A candle must be carefully placed in each bag to illuminate it. And the bags must be properly spaced and all of the candles lit at the proper time. It is a time-consuming process, to say the least. But the result is breath-taking.

And it was on Christmas Eve, as I drove around and gazed at the hundreds of luminarias, that I realized that each of us who has been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection is a luminaria – a lantern to others to light the way to Christ. In today's Gospel reading, a couple of John the Baptist's disciples are hanging out with him the day after he baptized Jesus. Jesus happens to walk by, and John points to him and says, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!", and the disciples immediately abandon John and run to Jesus. Jesus asks them what they are looking for. They cannot articulate what it is that they are looking for, but they are drawn to Jesus, and they ask him where he is staying. And once Andrew spends time in the presence of Jesus, he knows who Jesus is, and he cannot wait to find his brother Simon and bring him to meet the Messiah, the Light of the World. And of course it was Simon who became Peter, the Rock on which Christ founded his Church.

Christ, the Light of the World, was initially made known through the disciples, who were all a little rough around the edges, and that light continues to shine through us today. We ourselves are simple, like paper bags, and by ourselves, we are not strong. In fact, we require a lot of work. It is by bending us down with pressure, like the tops of the bags when they are folded, that God makes us strong and able to remain upright. We must be grounded in Christ, as the bag is grounded with sand, lest the winds of change toss us to and fro. Like luminarias, we find ourselves in a variety of places in our lives – sometimes high on rooftops, sometimes low in gutters and alleyways, and sometimes even on fences. When people look at luminarias, they don't see dull paper bags with sand and candles just sitting in them; they see glowing lanterns that light the path and dispel the darkness.

Likewise, when people look at us, they should see the darkness of the world dispelled by the Light of Christ as he reaches into our lives to kindle his love within our hearts, and they should see that Light of Christ amplified through us in the way we live our lives. And it is then, when others look at us and see that light glowing from within, that their path will be illumined and they will see God, present here and now.

The true light has come into the world, but it is by shining through us that He is made known to others as we light the path for them to follow. We can light the path that leads to peace. We can light the path that leads to care and concern for the poor and the lonely and the oppressed. In other words, we can light the path that leads to Christ. Ultimately, we bring others to Christ when we bring Christ to them. It was indeed Christ who went before the Israelites in a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire and led them out of bondage in Egypt. It was Christ who led the way to Calvary and released the bonds of sin. And it is Christ who dwells within us that leads not only us, but those who see us, to the Father.

Let's listen again to the words of the Collect for today: Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world: Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshipped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth.

During this season of Epiphany, may God live within each of us in the person of Jesus Christ, and may each of us radiate His light, that those who do not yet know Him may be guided along the path that leads to eternal life.

Amen.