

Do you recognize this candle? ...Yes, this is one of the kinds of candles we pass out every Christmas Eve! During Silent Night, the pastor lights a candle from the Christ Candle on the Advent Wreath, and we all have our candles lit from that one flame. I used to love this moment as a little girl. I loved looking around in the dark sanctuary at all the flames lighting up everyone's faces. It was so pretty. I also loved that I was entrusted with my own little candle: it made me feel special but also as part of the group because everyone had their own little candle. I loved watching the wax melt and fall down the sides of the candle. I loved looking at the different color of the flame from the bottom where it is blue to the top where it is yellow. Looking at the flame made me feel calm and warm, but also full of care, because fire can burn.

As I grew up and I paid more attention to the words and meaning behind the candle lighting, it started to feel even bigger and more wonderful to me. One pastor said, "Jesus is the light of the world" as she lit the candle and passed it on. Watching the light spread I thought about how Jesus entrusts us with that light to spread to the world. Knowing the story of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples like tongues of fire, I began to think of the Holy Spirit when I saw each person with their little flame. We are all united in this light spreading mission. (I'll bet a lot of people come to church on Christmas Eve and they don't know the meaning behind the candle lighting, they just like to light the candles. There are a lot of things we do and we don't really think about the meaning until we are reminded.)

Do you know why we light those candles back there?...Have you noticed sometimes they haven't been lit?...Kyler lit them last week. Pastor lit them two weeks in a row before that. They are not lit right now... Why? Well, we had some questions about candle supply, and acolyte lists, and whether to keep the tradition going at all. The Presbyterian Church USA, the denomination our church is a member of, has two big books we call our constitution and a whole section in there dedicated to how we lead worship, especially on Sundays. Guess what? It only says the word "candle" in it three times, once as an optional gift after baptism, once as a big traditional candle called a pascal candle that some churches use at memorial services, and once when talking about the things the elders are in charge of arranging: flowers, candles, banners, paraments, and other things. So candles are not essential to Presbyterian worship.

What is important to us is that the baptismal font and the communion table: those represent our two sacraments. Our two sacraments, baptism and communion are the two ways that we believe God most clearly reaches out to us through ordinary things like bread, fruit and water, and says, “I love you, you are my child, you are welcome in my family, you are washed clean, provided for, and you belong.”

So why do we have those candles back there?...Well, they’re part of our particular church family’s tradition; they are familiar and we feel things are as they should be when they are lit up. They’re also very beautiful and they add to the loveliness of the sanctuary when they are lit. But there is more meaning for the light than just we’re used to it and they’re pretty. In fact, throughout our Scriptures, when God shows up, very often God shows up like a bright light. Do you remember how God showed up for Moses?...Do you remember how God showed up for the Israelites in the desert?...In the psalms, some of them written by King David, did you know God describes Godself in contrast to darkness?...Yes! God, in God’s truest form, is dazzling.

In today’s scripture passage, Jesus shows three of his disciples a big glimpse of what he really looks like. Normally, when he is healing and teaching and eating and sleeping, Jesus blends in with other humans. But Jesus is fully human and fully God. And when they go up to the top of the mountain, Jesus shows Peter, James and John, (who already know that Jesus is fully human), that he is also fully God. Jesus shines so brightly it dazzles them. They hardly know what to say. When Peter tries to say some silly things that doesn’t make any sense, a voice interrupts and says about Jesus: “This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him!”

I really want lighting the candles to remind us of God as God is in this story of the transfiguration on the mountain, and in the story of Moses and the burning bush, and in the poetry of King David, and in the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit. I hope lighting the candles reminds us that we need the Holy Spirit to understand God’s word and to carry out our calling to spread the light of Christ through the Holy Spirit into the world.

How are we going to do that?...Well, we have a brand new way of lighting the candles from this Sunday onwards. Do you want to go on a fieldtrip with me to see how it’s going to work?... So we used to light the candles either before the service started or in the middle of the first hymn. But it was never listed in the bulletin. We have always had this listed in the bulletin though: it’s called the Prayer for Illumination. Do you know what illumination means?...It

means to light up! We say a prayer to the Holy Spirit, light up these words we are about to read. We believe that without the Holy Spirit helping us to read Scripture, those are just words on a page. Only through God's Spirit can we understand God's word for us today. That's why we pray that prayer every Sunday. But we are praying for Light! So we've moved the candle lighting to the prayer where we pray for light! Isn't that cool? ...So, from now on, after the special message or special prayer for the children, the acolyte will meet the pastor at the baptismal font. Our acolyte today is Ms. Virginia. C'mon forward Ms. Virginia.

We're meeting at the baptismal font because we are used to seeing the Holy Spirit at work in the water of baptism. So we are reminded of the Holy Spirit most right at this spot. Then pastor will give the acolyte the candlelighter and light the candlelighter with this little candle. It should remind you of Christmas Eve when we all get a flame from the Christ candle! Then pastor will say a prayer that draws from all the imagery and beauty of Scripture where God describes Godself as the light. While pastor prays this prayer, the acolyte will light the candles from the outside in, as if we are going up the mountain, drawing nearer into the center, to see Jesus. Then, pastor will go up the stairs from the baptismal font that reminds us of the Holy Spirit, to the pulpit that reminds us of reading the Bible. The acolyte will follow her to the second candelabra. Then pastor will say the part of the prayer that talks about how the Holy Spirit lights up the scriptures so that we can understand the word of God for us today. And once the candles are lit and we remember all the ways God uses light to help us understand more of who God is, we will say amen. But that's not all!

My favorite thing about this prayer is that everyone gets to pray it, not with words, but with humming. There is a beautiful hymn called "Open My Eyes that I may see" that talks about illumination in its lyrics. While the pastor prays and the acolyte lights the candles, from now on, everyone is going to hum the tune to that hymn along with the piano (or organ). So, in our new illumination liturgy, we have prayer through music, prayer through candle lighting, prayer through movement, prayer through scripture, and prayer through words.

And all of this is so we draw closer to God in everything we do. We don't just go through the motions because we're used to it. We remember the meaning when we light the candles. This new way of lighting candles is so meaningful and we want to invite our children to be the acolytes whenever you want to be. But we also want to open up the role of acolyte to some

adults who also want to help communicate this meaning. Lots of adults are shy, so saying hi to everyone at the door, like an usher, is stressful. Lots of adults love to read, but they don't love to read out loud in public, like the lectors. But those same adults would absolutely be able to say yes to glorifying God by lighting candles. Ms. Virginia is the first of those adults, and I'm really grateful for her leadership. I think if we team up, kids and adults, teens and tweens, we might be able to light the candles every week from now on. There is a sign-up sheet in the back of the sanctuary if you would like to be an acolyte...What do you think?...Then let's do it!

Prayer for Illumination: God is light. In God there is no darkness at all. (1 John 1:5)

O Holy One: You who appeared in the blaze of the burning bush (Exodus 3:2), in the pillar of fire through the wilderness (Exodus 13:21), and in the fire on the top of the mountain, (Exodus 24:17) Open our Eyes.

As we light these candles, remind us that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it (John 1:5) As we light these candles, remind us that with you is the fountain of life; in your light, we see light (Psalm 36:9) As we light these candles, remind us that we rely on the light of the Holy Spirit – who empowers the reading, understanding, proclaiming and living of Thy Word. (W-3.0302) Thy word is a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our path (Psalm 119:105) Let us walk in the light (1 John 1:5) Following the Light (John 8:12) That we may spread the light (Matthew 5:14-16) As children of the light (1 Thessalonians 5:5) As we light these candles, may we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit, when tongues of fire rested on each faithful follower, all together in one place. (Acts 2:1-3) As we light these candles, may the Holy Spirit fall afresh on us, like the flames of fire flickering on each familiar holder in this holy space. (Acts 2:4) As we light these candles, may their light help us understand your Living Word through the lens of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23) O Holy One, our light and our salvation (Psalm 27:1), open our eyes. Amen

Luke 9:28-36      “Shine, Jesus, Shine”

I'm sure you noticed, the sermon was mostly in the children's message today. God is light and in God there is no darkness at all. In our illumination liturgy we called to mind many of the ways God shows up, brightening our darkness. In today's passage, Jesus holds nothing back: at the top of the mountain, as he was praying, his face changes, his clothes dazzle, he is joined by the giver of the law, Moses, and the representative of the prophets, Elijah, and when this glorious moment is babbled over by Peter not knowing what he was saying, a cloud overshadows the whole scene and a voice says, “This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him.” It is a flash of the beauty of God. It is a foretaste of glory divine. It's such a gorgeous moment, it barely needs a sermon. It needs a song. A candle. A lighting flash. But I'll share with you what stood out to me on this zillionth time reading this brilliant story. (Because it's what y'all are used to, and it won't take that long).

We cannot comprehend God at God's brightest. Peter, who was given a front row seat to understanding Jesus, could not comprehend God at God's brightest. The light of Christ is dazzling. God in God's truest brightness is too much for those closest to Jesus to take in.

Peter feels closest to Jesus, in fact, Jesus feels closest to us, when Jesus is just a man: catching fish, teaching love of neighbor, healing broken relationships, walking and talking, eating and sleeping, crying and laughing, singing and praying, living and dying. God stooped down to our level, took on flesh, walked among us, became human, so that we could have a relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Otherwise, God would dazzle us and tongue tie us and leave us trembling in the dust – if we saw God transfigured all the time. But God also wants to be known, as much as God can be known, by our feeble human minds. Not just as fully human but as fully God. But we, like Peter, couldn't handle all of that. If we went to the top of that mountain, we would be dazzled by the fullness of who God is.

So, beloved, I believe we each get little pieces of it. We each are blessed with little epiphanies. We each are momentarily dazzled by glimpses of the glory of God – depicted as Jesus was transfigured on that mountain top. We experience God's brightness in brief windows that will not overwhelm us. Take that moment where the ice sparkled on the trees and you got a glimpse of God. Take that moment where you stopped to talk to someone on the side of the road and you swapped life stories as you helped them get through what they were going through and in that moment of mutual understanding and sacrificial kindness you got a glimpse of God. Take that moment where you told the church your cupboards were bare and the deacons showed up that day with food for you to eat, enough for that day, and food for you to eat, enough for a week, the next day, and, in the giving, someone got a glimpse of God, and, in the asking and receiving, someone got a glimpse of God and, in the beholding of this beauty, someone got a glimpse of God. Take the moment where you weren't as afraid of your sickness today as you were yesterday for reasons you cannot explain and you got a glimpse of God. Take the moment where you could've lost your temper but you found the peace that passes all understanding accessible to you right then and you got a glimpse of God. If you take every sip-of-coffee-with-a-Bible-on-your-lap contentment, every chord of the organ that brings a tear to your eye, every giddy feeling as you hear the joyful bark of your dog when he hears you coming home, every embrace of a friend when you really needed it, every sense of certainty that this is the next step,

every glowing candle, every glimpse of God: if you take them all and share them all and pull them together in our mutual stories, we get a bigger glimpse, closer to that full brightness that Peter got to witness. And gathering all the glimpses until they shine leaves us speechless.

You can say, that sounds nice Pastor LydiaGrace. And yes, it is. Because believing God reveals Godself to us in this way makes a difference in the way we treat one another. If I believe my trans brother in Christ, Mads, has seen a glimpse of God, I listen to his story. If I believe my trans friend, Katie, has seen a glimpse of God, I listen to her story. If I believe my nonbinary sibling, Slats, has seen a glimpse of God, I listen to their story. These are all real people. Hearing their stories, loving them in the fullness of who they are in the richness of their stories, has changed my life. I've watched some of them transition from one gender to another, reminding me of Jesus being transfigured on that mountain. Believing God reveals Godself to each of us in glimpses makes a difference, because I believe I cannot understand God fully until I listen and see how God shines in their lives. Believing that means I want to protect their lives. It means I believe they matter even when laws and legislation tell them they don't. I cannot understand God fully until I see how God shines in each of my siblings' lives. That goes for every child of God in Ukraine and in Russia, every child of God on the streets and in prison, and every child of God right here: every single one of you.

That's why I absolutely love the hymn "Shine, Jesus Shine." It was the very first hymn I intentionally memorized. I took its lyrics out to the path behind the church playground and I walked the path back and forth like some kind of 9-year-old contemplative monk. Instead of eating cookies and drinking lemonade, I walked and went over these words: "As we gaze on your kingly brightness, so our faces display your likeness, ever changing from glory to glory, mirrored here, may our lives tell your story. Shine on me." This poetry captures that blessed idea: that it is through each one of us glimpsing God and then reflecting God's brightness into our lives and the lives of others that we understand who God is. God is too bright for any one of us to comprehend all the light all at once, and were we to see it we would talk and not know what we were saying. But if we listen to each beloved child of God telling us who God has shown Godself to be in their lives, we get the bigger picture that is just small enough for us to understand, and just beautiful and bright enough to chase away the darkness.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.