

St James United Church



Message for February 1, 2026 Fourth Sunday after Epiphany (and Candlemas)

“Called to Shine in the Dark” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

1 Corinthians 12:18-31; Mathew 5:1-12; Malcolm Guite, “A Sonnet for Candlemas”

As I shared at the beginning of the service, we’re marking three occasions today, beginning Black History Month, reflecting on the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany as we ponder the opening of the Sermon on the Mount, and noting that tomorrow is Candlemas, when Jesus’ parents brought him to the temple. The reason for marking Candlemas along with the other occasions is two-fold. First, I wanted to recognize the significance of Candlemas in Newfoundland tradition, for the longest time considered the end of the Christmas season. There are folks with decorations up until tomorrow for that reason. Second, I feel Candlemas sheds light on the meaning of Jesus’ series of beatitudes, especially Simeon affirming Jesus as a light for revelation, or as Malcolm Guite put it, that “against the dark the Saviour’s face is bright.”

The image of Jesus shining brightly against darkness helps us to understand his message, with the caveat that in no way do I want to associate light with good or dark with bad, especially linking race and morality. That sadly has been the case, and as we see in Minneapolis, still is, Somalis called garbage and ICE agents stopping people based on the colour of their skin. That racial profiling like that is going on, and it happens here too, underscores why we mark Black History Month each year. With that caveat, what I mean by Jesus being a source of light is that he brought wisdom in the face of ignorance and injustice, revealing what God desires of us.

And that desire is expressed in Jesus’ series of “blessed are yous” preached on a hillside, Matthew portraying him as a new Moses. Before I explain, I want to offer another caveat. Sometimes you hear it said that Jesus brought a teaching of love to replace a law of wrath. We only get to that conclusion with a selective reading of the Older Testament, omitting all the calls to kindness and mercy, to care for the stranger and support those in need, and overlooking some of the harsher texts in the Gospels and Epistles. It especially overlooks that the ten commandments aren’t really a series of “don’ts,” not when the first one by Jewish counting is “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of enslavement in Egypt.” If this is the first, the series of “commands” that come after are ways to safeguard our shared liberation. Murder, kidnapping, sexual conquest, stealing, coveting, are all forms of exploitation, ways by which a system enslaves people. The teaching given to Moses at Mount Sinai is part of an ethic of communal care that breaks that system to make true freedom possible. Jesus speaks from the hilltop not to replace Moses’ teaching but remind the people of God’s intention for them.

They needed reminding, the teaching at Sinai returned to its liberative roots. Following the law had grown stricter, extra layers added, known as fencing, to ensure it was followed. There is some wisdom in that, as long as it is understood to be for nurturing personal holiness. But some used it to fence people out, judging some as blessed and others not. When blessing was connected to health, prosperity, power, it was easy to make collaboration with the Romans acceptable. But Jesus lifts as blessed the kinds of people considered opposite to traditional thinking, those who were weak, displaced, sick in body and heart because of oppressive power occupying their homeland, grieving, often prematurely, for the same reason. Jesus proclaims their situation blessed, not to suggest their circumstances were good but to let them know God saw them, was ready to liberate them as God did their ancestors.

And how? By inviting them to again follow an ethic of communal care, an ethic to be applied beyond the ancestral tribes of Israel this time to include all nations. Hence Simeon's saying that Jesus brings the light of revelation for the Gentiles and glory to his own people. This is both-and. Either-or thinking is the darkness Jesus brings light against, the hatred, anger, supremacist thinking that places one group over another - Judean over Galilean, Roman over Judean, rich over poor, man over woman, free over enslaved, white over black. Pushing those divisions was a way to consolidate power by exploiting people's fear in a time of uncertainty. It still is. Jesus offered a different vision. In God's heavenly empire blessing is shared from bottom up to ensure everyone is cared for, loved, supported. We facilitate that blessing when we show compassion, when we seek reconciliation, when we struggle for justice, ways that we liberate others through our communal care, a care extended to every people.

Thankfully, that is what we're seeing in Minneapolis, not just one-over-another thinking as those with power seek to consolidate more, but the opposite as the people rally, not just protesting but checking in on neighbours afraid to go out, setting up warming stations in cafes, gathering to sing together to boost each other's morale. And protesting. It's risky and so Alex Pretti lost his life. But he did so trying to help someone, did so because he believed in supporting neighbours, and not just neighbours who looked like him, did so because he followed an ethic of communal care. His willingness to lay down his life for others is the wisdom of the cross, foolishness to the world but the value system at the heart of God's heavenly empire. If we make that our centre, we too will shine in the dark, will be a light for revelation to the nations and the glory of God's people.

And it is to keep being that light that we gather around the table this morning. In communion, where everyone is welcome to partake, where no one is fenced out, we embody the ethic of communal care at the heart of both the law of Moses and Jesus' beatitudes. Here we get a taste of what that looks like, affirm too what it may cost us as we recall that Jesus' last meal was shared under the shadow of the cross, are strengthened in grace to live it even if it means giving our lives away. Along with Black History Month, we mark both the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany and Candlemas today. We recall how as Jesus was brought to the temple he was affirmed as a light of revelation. He was that revelation, not just in word but action, sharing love, responding with compassion, standing against division and injustice, shining in a dark age. This time too feels dark. Thankfully, Jesus calls us as his disciples to shine brightly in it. May we do so. Amen.