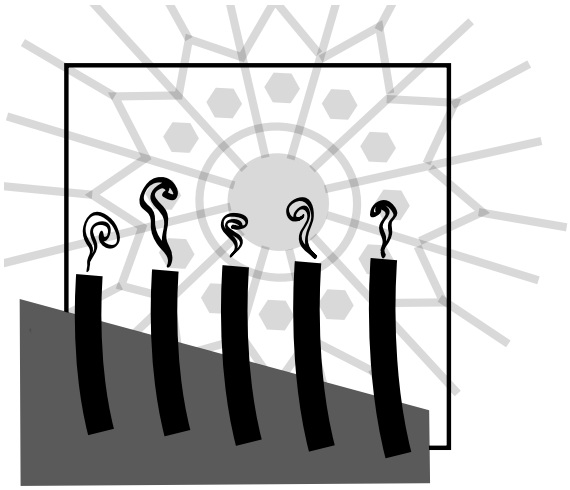



# Reintroducing Candlemas

***Jared R. Stahler***

I love liturgy. The solemnity of ritual enchants me. I consider it a great gift that, in the midst of "the changes and chances of this life," as the prayer puts it, liturgy can hold many images and themes in unresolved, creative tension. In an era of societal polarization, we need liturgy's particular ability to present multivalent meanings, to invite us into a life shaped by both/and rather than either/or. Liturgy presents us with ever-new and renewing visions of ourselves and God. I love liturgy and I want others to love liturgy, too, because liturgy is about and directed to God. Liturgy proclaims the gospel.

I begin this essay by considering some ways in which liturgy is formed and forms those who participate in it. The second section explores the experience of people who are new to Christian community. In the final section I discuss my own church's work to craft liturgies in general, and a Candlemas liturgy in particular, that are responsive to the issues raised in the preceding sections. Put another way: the first two sections give some background into our parochial approach; a key, if you will, to adapting the Candlemas material presented here in other local contexts.

### *Formed and Forming*

Though he probably never said it, St. Francis of Assisi is often quoted as offering the instruction, "Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary." Sometimes liturgy is realized in the profound silence of wordlessness, relying on clear and unmistakable actions and gestures, or no movement at all. Our Quaker sisters and brothers have discovered a great deal of wisdom practicing this sort of liturgical discipline in their meetings. Though some of us who are accustomed to wordful liturgies would say the Quaker practice is carried out *in extremis*, others of us, after having sung fervently and longingly about it for years—the "still, small voice of calm" of Quaker John Greenleaf Whittier's poem "Brewing of Soma" masterfully set by C. Hubert H. Parry to the tune Repton—have begun to practice it, too. We adopt and adapt the tradition both conserved and matured for centuries by Quakers into our own contexts.

Anyone who has introduced silence into a community shaped primarily by words knows the considerable challenge it is to invite people to be still. Newcomers to silence find it uncomfortable, especially as it lingers, seemingly on and on. Some rush to fill the silence, anxiously preparing for whatever comes next. Still others throw in the towel when silence is broken, especially when a child cries out.

A few years ago, presiding at a series of tragic burials that disquieted a close-knit community, it seemed to me most appropriate for mourners to walk in silence at the cemetery rather than recite the traditional Scripture verses that I, and so many, hold dear. Everyone else apparently thought the same thing too, innately keeping one of the most profound periods of silence I have ever experienced. There was no need for direction. A good liturgical leader simply honors what needs to be honored, and by honoring it invites others do the same.

My point is this: we look out for the pastoral needs of our communities and respond appropriately, which sometimes means examining and altering what has become our "default," however beloved that default may be. We do what is necessary for the sake of the gospel. The step-by-step, taciturn procession was the only thing that could bear the immense grief of everyone present at those tragic burials. Not only that, the procession proclaimed what these mourners needed most: however much death had shaken this community, they were held together in their common grief. Silence proclaimed new life and resurrection in a way words could not. As we walked from grave to grave, we walked together as the wounded, yet somehow whole, body of Christ.

Most often, though, liturgy is saturated with words. I love words. I love the language of liturgy, language that is direct, succinct, beautiful. I feel a sense of tremendous satisfaction when liturgies include some of the most poetic, memorable, time-honored, and (necessarily) prescribed phrases ever written. We do not so much form but *are* formed by words such as these.

An example. The church I serve closes every parish meeting by reciting Compline, which makes this prayer second in our community only to the Our Father:

> O Lord, support us all the day long of this troubled life, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes and the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, in Your mercy, grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We have sat at table together with people for whom this nighttime promise has come true. We have collaborated with them. We have rejoiced with them. We have argued with them. And we have prayed with them. Together we have been and are being formed to know that no matter the things done or left undone, in life and even in death, we are all God's.

*New to Faith*

Formation such as this is a predominant concern for any pastor, for any faith community. It is especially so in metropolitan areas like New York, where I serve. Migrants, particularly young migrants prompted mostly by economic conditions, are flocking to urban areas, people from other parts of the United States and people from other parts of the globe. My faith community, Saint Peter's Church, which is located in the heart of midtown Manhattan, is not unique among churches that minister in such settings. We have parishioners from other faith traditions and from no faith tradition at all. If current trends hold, those who grew up Lutheran or who grew up practicing religion in some way will fast be outnumbered by those with little or no such background.

The "unchurched" or the "Nones," as a recent Pew study categorized them, as well as people coming from other traditions, are often overwhelmed in churches that undertake the high and honorable calling of being faithful conservators of wordful and robust traditions. A colleague whom I admire very much is planting a church in California among largely unchurched twenty- and thirty-somethings. The burgeoning community's new and already devout church leaders have this to say about their pastor's bulletins: no matter how much he tries to pare back, the printed text is too long and contains way too many rubrics. These nascent Christians are overwhelmed by the sheer amount of printed liturgical material—likely the near sum of the limited print material they've ever held in their hands—and don't know what half the words mean.

That's a tough perspective with which rubric-worshiping people like me struggle to reconcile. There is no more compelling motivation to do so, however, than serving as a pastor among a growing and changing community. We need communities to serve as custodians of the church's best wordful and robust liturgical traditions, and we do well to invest in their future. For example, Lutheran chorales and the cantatas they inspire are a treasure entrusted not only to our preservation but also to our continued creative energies.

I have come to see that we also need to be attentive to what newcomers are telling us. A newcomer's typical experience of church is not unlike someone unaccustomed to silence exercising this newly-found treasure with a long inaugural stretch of absolute stillness. Understanding, perspective, and appreciation are learned incrementally, with one step simultaneously building on the previous and leading to the next. Investing in some accessible steps for newcomers in order that they might walk step by step into rich liturgical traditions will do churches well.

I'm not certain why, or if it is conscious or unconscious, but we have turned over the needs of the curious to megachurches or those whose worship life takes its cues from the entertainment industry. Aside from a few materials published decades ago by the (now closed) Alban Institute, most literature on welcoming new people into Christian community comes from new and emerging publishers, and with few exceptions not from established church presses at all. Fewer still are liturgical materials geared toward the newcomer. Because I love liturgy and know its capacity to show forth God's great love, my interest is in meeting the inquisitiveness of people new to or considering church again with liturgy that is at once faithful to rich traditions and responsive to their place on the journey.

*Parish Practice*

The church I serve is profoundly attuned to the promise of liturgy and the needs of people new to a liturgical community. Jazz came to Saint Peter's in 1965. It was innovative, it was edgy, and people who otherwise would not be found in church flocked to that new thing, a Jazz Vespers. They felt connected to God and connected to church. A recent visitor to Saint Peter's told me about an early encounter at Jazz Vespers, when decades ago he heard for the first time someone shout "Amen" during a sermon. Gleeful, he introduced himself to the woman who had raised her voice so enthusiastically. She returned the courtesy and said, "I'm Ella." As in, Ella Fitzgerald.

Over the intervening years the needs of the people of the city of New York have changed just as much as the city itself has. Where in the 1960s and 1970s jazz musicians or jazz aficionados seeking a relationship with God were delighted to play jazz or hear jazz in a church, nowadays people long for this and more. Perhaps it is the aftermath of 9/11 and a world at nearly constant war and turmoil. We crave ritual and its beauty, crave not so much its answers but the questions it raises, crave a safe zone in which to open our hearts to God, and vice versa.

With my senior colleague Amandus Derr, our Director of Music for Jazz Ike Sturm, and a host of committed lay leaders, we have, for nearly a decade, gradually reached into the great tradition of the church with the goal of crafting liturgy and music

in a way that is accessible for people who are new to church or to jazz or to both. Because Saint Peter's also is home to a richly developed liturgical community and a growing Spanish-language community with an equally robust *misa*, some people have thought we were simply importing these or other traditions into Jazz Vespers. To follow this approach would be disastrous, however, since most of the church's rich liturgical traditions have developed alongside and interacted with a number of musical traditions other than jazz.

What we have done is to develop a liturgy that is truly infused with and guided by jazz. Ike has composed several settings of the mass. Jazz Vespers now includes a complete *Lucinarium* (*Phos Hilaron* and all) in which people leave their seats and share light from the Vesper candle, a congregationally-sung Psalm improvisation, readings, sermon, prayers, and a Magnificat in which people do not simply join their voices to Mary's song of praise but are also invited to receive anointing with oil, laying-on of hands, and prayer for healing. Everything is geared toward those new to or returning to church. (Much of this material has been published in a variety of sources both in print and online and is in use in a number of settings. Ike's reflections on the relationship of musical and liturgical materials for mass and Vespers are also widely available.)

### *Candlemas at Saint Peter's*

Recently our attention has turned toward a handful of festival days in the church's liturgical year, which we do not view simply as ornamentation but as opportunity to expand and deepen people's experience of the arc of God's promises. The Presentation of our Lord or Candlemas (we spell it CandleMass) is a particular favorite. On this day we remember Jesus' presentation in the temple and Anna and Simeon's rejoicing as they beheld God's presence. It is a day that celebrates seniors and children alike. There is a lot of singing, especially Simeon's song; there are plenty of candles, traditionally blessed for the coming year; there is incense, brought to the altar and among all people.

Saint Peter's eleven o'clock AM community has long celebrated this festival day, mostly by making use of traditional Lutheran resources and wonderful new Anglican materials found in *Common Worship* (published by the archbishops' council in 2006). But it is to the five o'clock PM Jazz Vespers community that Candlemas is especially important. Wintertime evenings in midtown Manhattan prompt keen awareness of the patterns of the sun. Throughout the winter months Jazz Vespers takes place primarily in dim light. With Candlemas we begin to notice the days growing markedly longer; February 2 (or close to it, as we always transfer the festival to the nearest Sunday) falls midway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox.

The deeper meaning of Candlemas presents not simply the reality of growing light but also of death. Candlemas is the hinge point in the liturgical year from the manger to the cross. The gold, frankincense, and myrrh brought by the magi become gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, and myrrh for burial. Accordingly, the task of liturgy is to delve into the mystery of the incarnation: to give depth to Christmas and a greater sense of the profound to Holy Week and Easter.

What precisely the mystery of the incarnation means has a long and storied history. A good number of the church's heresies comes from attempts to explain the nature and person of the triune God made flesh in Christ Jesus. The language of systematic theology is helpful to students and professors and pastors but not so much to parishioners like the great majority of those who are exploring Christianity. The task at hand is to convey the gravity and truth of the incarnation in liturgy and in song in a way that resonates with those new to the church.

We have found that one of the most effective and heart-moving ways to provide for the liturgical formation of people new to the church is to craft a few memorable phrases that can be learned by the liturgical assembly and repeated with confidence. Used in alternatum with additional liturgical language offered by a leader or series of leaders, the result is a gradual unfolding coupled with a gradual exploration of tenets of the Christian faith. In this way, new and renewing visions of ourselves and God emerge not by study or memorization but by liturgical experience. Formation by experience is one reason so many love liturgy. This sort of dialogue is highly participatory, and because it does not rely on recitation of texts but rather communal experience, it builds community between and among God and the people.

One such phrase we developed for Candlemas is "God, born in us." *God* so as to eschew Arianism and Nestorianism. *Born*, borrowing from the prevailing ecumenical translation of the Apostles' Creed ("born of the virgin Mary") and immediately understandable. *In us*, to convey humanity while maintaining at once the personal and the communal, spoken by individuals in community. As the exchange unfolds, *God, born in us* becomes itself enfleshed in the liturgical assembly.

Communal song is another way both to invite people into the community and to be formed by it. The traditional response announcing the Presentation of our Lord, "Alleluia! Praise to you, O Christ!" lends itself quite well to a through-composed musical setting. Several such examples exist in a number of liturgical books. We are keenly aware, however, that many people who join our liturgical assembly do not read music and would simply fumble along, lost on a page if it were presented to them. I myself, as a conservatory-trained classical musician, cannot read a lead sheet, and jazz rhythms written out on a page look far more confusing to me than they sound. (Ike has a penchant for composing in 5 or 7 or 9.)

Our approach to the response

announcing the Presentation emerged out of experience with weeks and weeks of experimentation for improvised congregational psalm singing at Vespers and mass. Here a song leader builds a full-scale improvisation on a short, often two- or three-note musical idea. In the case of a psalm, these pitch and rhythmic motives give the song leader just enough musical material to intone the appointed verses and the opportunity to invite the liturgical assembly to join in singing various phrases (such as whole quotations from the psalm text) or themes (such as "Mercy," "Longing," "Hear us," "Rejoice") or a combination of both phrases and themes. All the while the instruments support, lead, and solo in, with, and under robust congregational song. With this approach the particular genius of jazz is fully exploited: liturgy is conceived and taught and experienced aurally and face to face.

We struggled with how to distill "Alleluia! Praise to you, O Christ!" into a shorter phrase to facilitate this sort of participation. "Alleluia" didn't seem quite right; would people even know what it means? Better to use what it means, we thought. However, "Praise to you, O Lord!" or "Praise to you, O Lord Christ!" both seemed too long. Finally we settled on what should have been obvious from the beginning, and probably would have been to our ancestors searching for very much the same thing as the Great Litany developed at Hagia Sophia centuries ago: "Praise God!"

One of the most memorable moments in Candlemas is the recitation of the *Nunc Dimittis,* the adoption of Simeon's song as the assembly's song, as our song. It turns us—us in whom God is born—toward the cross on which hangs the salvation of the whole world. It juxtaposes birth and death. It points to the fullness of life and our mortality. These are some of the most poetic words ever written. They are etched on my heart. I sing them by heart. And every time I do it is a tremendously spiritual experience, one that deepens each and every time I sing Simeon's words as my own.

For people new to church, Simeon's words can be overwhelming—and that's probably a good thing; death is not an underwhelming experience. Whereas many of us have learned these words by heart, for new people they are wholly new. We developed an approach that allows the entire *Nunc Dimittis* to be sung while also including the congregation as they are able. Everyone in the assembly joins their voice in proclaiming "Now, Lord," which is immediately followed by a phrase of Simeon's song. *Now, Lord,* the congregation sings, with the song leader continuing, *You let your servant go in peace*. *Now, Lord,* the congregation sings, with the song leader continuing, *Your word has been fulfilled*. And so forth.

Spoken or sung, this setting is both cohesive and complete. It interweaves participation at all different levels: those with no experience can join those who know these words by heart in making Simeon's song their own. This approach makes it possible for new people to join at any and in every time, even as others gradually learn more and more by heart.

Weaving the whole song together is that one recurring word, the promise that surprised Simeon and Anna: *now*. It is a fitting word, for this promise God makes to them is made to all of us who have held Christ in our hands and touched Christ to our lips and who as the rite unfolds see Christ in the glow of candles reflecting on our faces. A light that shines even in death. For people otherwise shaped by cultural anxiety about the end of life, this particular part of Candlemas offers an essential entry point into God's graveside promise: Rest eternal grant them, O Lord. And let light perpetual shine upon them.

*Taking Candlemas Home*

When people come to Saint Peter's and to Jazz Vespers, they often ask how they could do something like this in their own context. I always wonder precisely what they mean. Is it that they want jazz in their churches? Is it that they found entry into a community and saw others entering into a community from all sorts of walks of life? Is is that they are looking for these things and more?

Our answer is always,"Yes!"

Liturgies like this can be crafted with whatever resources are available: with the greatest of musicians or with musicians with the greatest of hearts, cutting-edge jazz or old-school jazz, world music, other music, or no music at all. If no musician is available, spoken words will suffice. Or courage may lead to trying out a few basic tones. Parts for the liturgical assembly can be taught aurally or necessary cues can be printed in a bulletin. The principles and approaches are infinitely adaptable because crafting a liturgical assembly filled with new and seasoned members alike is responding to a pastoral concern for people, attentiveness to the tradition, and a commitment to use, even experiment, with whatever resources are available. This I know: wherever we are, and whatever our context, God has blessed us richly with gifts. So richly that we all, with one voice, praise God! LF

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