

Sermon-Pascha 2020

It seems almost disingenuous to invite you to “come and receive the Light” when you are not standing in the church, able to hold a candle to receive a flame from the Holy Altar. And yet, “virtual” or not, this is exactly what we are going to sing in a few minutes. Since the beginning of my priesthood, I have offered a few words in the dark, and then emerged from the Holy Altar with the Light of Christ, and in a few minutes, the entire church is bathed with the warm glow of lit candles. This year, I have been contemplating this short homily for a few weeks, stumped at what I could say, knowing that this year, the light will be shared with only a few people, and the church will remain largely darkened. Yesterday afternoon, I had a moment of clarity about the Light of Christ. The Light of Christ is not a flame that ignites a candle. One can hold a lit candle and still be filled with darkness. The Light of Christ is a grace that ignites our souls, whether we are holding a lit candle or not. And so tonight, we are not going to light candles in our church, but the flame of our souls can still be kindled with the Light of Christ, as we proclaim His Resurrection, and reaffirm not only our faith, but how this faith affects our lives. During the Divine Liturgy tonight, we will read from the Gospel of John, how no darkness can overtake the Light of Christ—not a virus, not a recession, not a loss of vacation or graduation, not the death of a family member—nothing can overtake the Light of Christ, nothing can put out His flame in your soul. The whole point of the Holy Week journey, and the reason it culminates in the giving of the Paschal Light is so that we can strengthen our souls. It’s not about getting the “fos” to our homes. It’s about kindling our souls. So that if the flame in your soul feels like it is going out, tonight in the Resurrection, you can light it anew. If it is flickering, you can strengthen it. And if it is already burning brightly, it can burn even more brightly.

Many times during this Lenten season, we have offered the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy, during which a candle is raised with the words “The Light of Christ illumines all people.” Anyone who wants to know Christ will be illumined by His light. We pray tonight for illumination—to navigate our way through crisis and a return to life as we know it; to keep our faith strong in this time of isolation, until we can return to our community; and to keep our resolve even stronger, once this crisis has passed, to remember in our hearts, what it was like to yearn for Christ in the Eucharist.

The Light of Christ is a light that shines in darkness and no darkness can overtake it. The light of a candle is not the Light of Christ. Blow on a candle and it goes out. Walk in the wind and the candle blows out. The Light of Christ cannot be put out by a blow of a crisis, or by the wind of change.

The peace of Christ is a peace that passes all understanding, a peace that can come even in the midst of conflict. No crisis can take away Christ’s peace. It can take away financial peace, but not Christ’s peace.

The love of Christ is a love that knows no boundaries. Even the worst sinner can still be loved by Christ. No crisis changes that either.

So tonight, receive the Light of Christ, not as a physical flame to light a candle, but as a spiritual flame to ignite your soul. Receive the peace of Christ and use it as a comfort in this time of uncertainty. Receive the love of Christ, and wherever you are in your life, accept His love. We also have the power to give Christ-like love—we can love even the least of our brethren, we can forgive those who have wronged us, we can make a new start with ourselves or with others. This is what Christ's love is all about, and it's very much on the table tonight as well.

The light that burns on the altar table from which the Paschal candle is lit has remained lit for my entire ministry at St. John. The light never gets extinguished, it just gets transferred to a new candle every few days. If anyone is concerned that they won't get the Paschal light this year, when we all return to our church, I'd be happy to light a candle from the altar candle at any time. We have the Paschal Light burning at all times on the Holy Altar table.

I close this Lent with a prayer that we will make the journey next year, as we are used to making it. When I reflect on this Holy Week, I will do so with thanksgiving for what was, and not what wasn't. I will focus on the good that came out of it, and will hopefully still come out of it long after we complete this journey.

And I will have joy, based on a hymn we will sing tonight—O Divine, O Beloved, O sweetest voice, You promised that You would be with us until the close of the age. With this as our anchor of hope, we rejoice.

God is always with us. And with this as our anchor of hope, we can rejoice, even tonight, even as we mark the Resurrection like this. The truth of the Resurrection and the promise of salvation are unaffected by our present crisis. In fact, the present crisis will hopefully motivate and inspire us to hold fast to that truth and place our hope in that promise. As St. Paul wrote in Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me." We have gotten through this week with Him. We will get through this crisis with Him.

A stay at home order has separated us from the church tonight, but as we read in Romans 8:38-39, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."