

Mysteries of February

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [February 8, 2011](#) issue



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It's February, and the lectionary takes us from the dwindling lights of Christmas and Epiphany to the drudgery of which Job complains: "Has not man a hard service upon earth, and are not his days like the days of a hireling? Like a slave who longs for the shadow, and like a hireling who looks for his wages, so I am allotted months of emptiness, and nights of misery are apportioned to me" (RSV). No month seems more empty than February—its dreariness is the theme of all the idle weather commiseration around town, and the literary types who huddle in Starbucks over MacBooks and soy lattes are updating their Facebook profiles with anti-February aphorisms from Shakespeare ("Why, what's the matter, / That you have such a February face, / So full of frost, of storm and cloudiness?"), or Shelley ("February bears the bier") or Joseph Wood Krutch ("The most serious charge which can be brought against New England is not Puritanism but February").

Thankfully, Christians have in the liturgical calendar a potent remedy for February's doldrums. When February begins, Christmas has barely ended; when February ends we will be well on our way to the mysteries of March.

The mysteries of March—it's an expression that has stayed with me ever since I read John Saward's book by that title—are better known than the merits of February. In March the Feast of the Annunciation—marking Christ's incarnation and Mary's yes—touches the orbit of Christ's passion. In the rare years when Good Friday falls on March 25, a single day encompasses the two great mysteries: the Redeemer in

the womb is the Redeemer on the cross.

February, on the other hand, is a subtle season; its message is easily missed. The only major fixed feast day is Candlemas (Hypapante in the Byzantine tradition); 40 days after the birth of Jesus, it marks the purification of the Virgin, the presentation of her firstborn son in the temple, and the meeting with the prophets Simeon and Anna, as depicted in Luke 2:22–35. By law, Mary must be purified before reentering the temple, though traditional sermons for this day stress that she was already the immaculate dwelling place of the incarnate Lord. By law and in memory of Passover, her firstborn son must be sacrificed—that is, given over to the service of God in the temple—unless redeemed by a substitute offering. The sacrificial redemption of the child foreshadows the redemptive sacrifice of the man; hence in one moment the prophet Simeon sees the light of revelation in the child's small face, and in the next he sees the sword that will pierce the mother's heart. The light of Christ, evoked by the candle-bearing processions traditional for this feast day, is as piercing as it is consoling.

The Candlemas tradition from which we get our groundhog legend ("If Candlemas day be bright and clear, / The half of the winter's tae come and mair. / If Candlemas Day be dark and foul, / The half of the winter was past at Yule") suggests something of the bittersweet character of February light. Christmas is finished now, and Epiphany is spent. Any remaining Christmas decorations are consigned to the attic. Before Lent begins there is a stretch (longer or shorter depending upon when Easter falls) of seemingly unremarkable time.

What can we say of this post-Candlemas, pre-Lenten time? How can it be experienced as something more than a mere secular bleakness fit to be grumbled at? Perhaps it is best seen in the light of an earlier February when Mary is a young virgin, living an ordinary life. She has heard neither the angel's greeting nor the prophet's warning, but while she goes about her daily business she is undergoing a hidden preparation. It's a month before the incarnation in the womb, a year before the presentation in the temple, and three decades and a month before the cross and the empty tomb. Yet all these mysteries that will unfold in time are present from eternity to God's mind. As John Donne puts it in one of his Marian poems: "Ere by the spheres time was created, thou / Wast in His mind, who is thy Son and Brother; / Whom thou conceivst, conceived." And if we are open to the old calendar lore, February is the month before the creation itself, the moment before the Big Bang, when this world and all its future history existed solely as an unborn idea in the mind

of God.

So these are the mysteries of February. At least in the northern hemisphere, February admirably fits the aged Simeon's prophecy of a spring in the heart of winter: the slant sun, the crocuses that lift their faces only to be slapped down by a sudden frost, the colder dawn offset by the longer light, the shivered rising rewarded with a shorter night. This month might suitably be consecrated to all hidden preparations, to children in the womb and to those who long to conceive—for in February all is potency, awaiting God's redeeming act.