

A dimly burning wick

By [David Dragseth](#)

January 3, 2011

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Dragseth's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

"A dimly burning wick he will not quench. . . " - Isaiah 42:3

Boston is dark in January. Very dark. At 5:30 p.m. light has completely abandoned the city. Sure, there is a kind of fake fluorescent light, a pale bluey glow, a TV light. But there is no authentic light, only illusion of it. And illusions only make the matter worse.

When I was a graduate student of light, or something called divinity, I craved the real thing. It's epiphany, I thought, let's sing Holden Evening Prayer. Let's light some candles. People will come. It's Harvard Square after all. . . all are raging against the dying of the light.

In order to boost attendance, and because I loved the man, I cajoled Krister Stendahl, former dean of the divinity school at Harvard and former Bishop of Sweden, to join us. "Preside at the table," I asked. Krister was an elegant man, tall, and precise. A few vertebrae in his back had been fused, and so he stood strikingly erect and moved with great patience.

I packed the chancel with candles, hundreds probably, and asked Krister to stand in the middle and preside over communion. The service was going nicely until communion when, at the height of his deliberate, liturgical cadence, Krister stopped, set down the elements, and stood in silence.

God, I thought, did I make a mistake? What's wrong, did I not provide the correct liturgical setting for him to read from?

For a great while he stood there not saying a word. Just as the atmosphere started to become tense he began to move, slowly, very slowly, like a ship moving through a lighted harbor. After nearly a minute he arrived at his destination: a small candle. He reached out his hand, cupped his fingers, and gently waved the flame back to life.

Another minute and he was back at the table, picking up his words where he had left off. I do not think he even looked once at my liturgical setting.