

The Ancient Judeo-Christian Roots of the Episcopal *Order for Worship for the Evening*¹

by Tom Hebert

The Episcopal Church's *Order for Worship for the Evening* was added to the Book of Common Prayer (BCP, page 109) in 1979. While a recent addition, the *Order* is a direct and close descendant of the Jewish practice of saying prayers at the lighting of candles when the setting sun signaled the start of the Sabbath, which was in turn adopted by many Jewish Christians of the 1st and 2nd centuries as a daily practice at sunset. The practice among Christians came to be known as the *Lucernarium* (Latin for "lamp-lighting") and was widely observed for centuries throughout Christianity. Over time the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Episcopal and related Western Christian traditions absorbed the *Lucernarium* into their versions of the monastic Daily Offices, although it was largely retained in the liturgy of lighting the Paschal Candle at Easter. The Episcopal Church included the *Order of Worship for the Evening* in the BCP in 1979 to make it once again a daily or weekly option for the average person.

The *Lucernarium* is one of the oldest identifiable Christian liturgical acts but born from practical necessity—lighting lamps at sunset. The first Christians began to use the lighting of the lamps as an opportunity to celebrate Christ as the "True Light" who dispels the darkness of the world. Central to the *Order* and the *Lucernarium* is the **Phos Hilaron** which is widely considered the oldest hymn outside of the Bible that is not a psalm or a canticle (like the *Magnificat*).

The *Lucernarium* was not a "service" in the first few centuries of Christianity in the way we think of one today; it was an action that marked the beginning of an evening gathering. For example, Bishop Hippolytus of Rome described in his *Apostolic Tradition* (c. 215 AD) the blessing a lamp brought into the room before their communal meal (Agape). A pilgrim named Egeria wrote in her diary in c. 385 about the "Service of Light" at Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulcher. She noted that they did not bring in light from the outside. Instead it was brought in from the church's *inner cave* (where Christ was believed to have been buried), serving as a powerful symbol of the Resurrection.

We will be concluding our Lenten *Order for Worship for the Evening* with a period of communal contemplative prayer. In many ways, then, we will be repeating the early Christian practice of observing *Lucernarium* before a communal Agape meal. Our communal meal, though, will be taken in through silent prayer.

¹ For a general Episcopal discussion of this *Order*, see the Episcopal Dictionary of the Church, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/order-of-worship-for-the-evening-an/>. For more detail, see "Commentary on the American Prayer Book" by Marion J. Hatchett. Hatchett was one of the primary liturgists involved in the 1979 revision. His **Commentary** traces the *Order for Worship for the Evening* back to the Jewish custom of blessing the light at the beginning of the evening meal and the early Christian *cathedral offices* that existed before the monastic system took over.