

Proper 22C
Peace, Seattle
October 2, 2016 epk
2 Timothy 1:1-14, Luke 17:5-10

FAN THE FLAME

It was Day #2 of a weeklong backpack in the Sierra Nevada wilderness. Our group of twelve had been woken the first night by a foraging black bear. The bear didn't get our food, but it did leave our leader, Jenny, with two-inch claw marks on her scalp. When the sun came up, we were anxious move on from that place.

It would be the most challenging day of the whole trip: a 10-mile, uphill climb carrying 40 pound packs, to a cluster of Alpine lakes just below 9,000 feet.

The sun shone brightly much of the morning, but when we stopped for lunch, dark clouds were beginning to form. When the rain came we figured we'd just stay in the trees, weather the shower and move on.

The group's pace slowed considerably as we started up again, and with the steepest part of our ascent still ahead, it became clear that we wouldn't reach camp until dusk.

An hour after lunch, we felt the first drops, and for the next five hours we hiked in unrelenting rain. By the time we reached our campsite, our boots and much of what we wore was soaking wet.

This was a recipe for hypothermia.

- Tired bodies
- Wet clothing
- Steady rain
- Falling temperature
- And soon the light would be gone.

We needed to get hot liquids into everyone's hands, and a hot meal into their stomachs! But this was 1975! We didn't have any compact, high-temperature backpack stoves!

What we needed was a fire, and we needed it fast.

The problem was, the wood scattered around the lake was soaked through.

We did have some dry kindling, though. Earlier in the day, Jenny and I had plucked some up and tucked it under our pack flaps as a hedge against what we might encounter later.

Now that dry wood was worth its weight in gold—the question was: would it be enough to get a fire going—the kind of fire we needed to hold up in this steady rain?

We scattered in pairs to search for any scrap of dry (or dryer) wood we could find, looking under the stunted trees and in the shadows of the huge granite boulders scattered around the site.

Our pile of firewood grew. Then, standing in a circle between two boulders, and forming a tent with our rain ponchos, we created a shelter as Jenny knelt to build the fire.

Using the driest pieces; some pages from a journal, and a handful of pine needles she struck a match and we had a small, tenuous, flame.

Carefully she fed the flame with slivers of dry kindling, and around it she built a cross-lay framework, feeding the growing blaze. All eyes were on her; nothing else in the world mattered, nothing else existed, except that fire.

Soon we felt our thighs growing warm, as the sizzle and pop of stored energy was released. Steam rose with the smoke as the rain-soaked wood began to dry and burn.

Before long we were drinking hot chocolate and Russian tea from our Sierra cups. The freeze-dried stroganoff we tried failed miserably, but the French Apple Compote was a success, and even trail mix tasted good when it you chased it with hot cocoa.

A flame was kindled that night, around us and within, drawing us into community. There would be no hypothermia, we would survive the night. Tomorrow would bring a new beginning.

When Paul writes his second letter to Timothy, he's writing to a young man who's been his companion, student and friend. And he's writing to a person who has gone through an ordeal so wounding that it's shaken Timothy's faith to the core.

What Timothy's been through, we don't know. We only have Paul's side of the correspondence. But whatever it was, Paul wants to get him reconnected to the call and promise which must be at the source of all ministry.

"I saw faith's flame in your Grandma Lois," writes Paul, "I witnessed it in your mother Eunice. And I know it lives in you. Fan that flame, rekindle the gift of God in you. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, and of love, and of self-discipline."

We all know what it's like to be discouraged; to feel we've failed and failed miserably at something. We know what it's like to wonder if the broken pieces in our lives can be repaired.

This is why Christ calls us into community so we can set aside our isolation and be sources of encouragement for one another; so we can fan the flame for each other—especially when the odds seem to be against us.

Today as we recall the life of St. Francis, it's important to remember that his life was no straight line. Francis went through a long and torturous journey before he relinquished his life to Christ. And the upside down power that grew from his commitment to a simple life of service became a witness to the world and revitalized the church.

Resistance to the story of a God who emptied himself, taking on a servant's role even to the point of giving his life, shouldn't surprise us. The world longs for power brokers, not servants.

If we're surprised that the world opposes this gospel we shouldn't be. It comes with the territory. Just like foraging bears in the mountains and wet wood in the wilderness.

But there is a light which cuts through this resistance.

IN CHRIST GOD, HAS MARKED YOU FOR LIFE, & NO MATTER HOW BURNED OUT YOU FEEL, NO MATTER HOW DISCOURAGED YOU ARE, YOU ARE NOT ALONE AND THIS IS NOT THE END OF THE STORY.

The Holy flame of Jesus Christ cuts through all that would tempt us toward either self-pity or apathy. It is a light no darkness can overcome.

It may seem, at times, that rekindling that flame is an impossible task. That our wood supply is soaking wet, and that spiritual hypothermia is going to set in.

But beneath the outer layers is a core of fuel waiting to ignite.

All that is needful our gracious God supplies—now, strike the match and fan Christ's flame!

Amen.