



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, YEAR B, APRIL 28, 2024

ACTS 8:36-40; PSALM 22:24-30; 1 JOHN 4:7-21; JOHN 15:1-8

KINDLING THE FIRE OF GOD'S LOVE

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love.

I have always loved that prayer, invoking the gift of the Holy Spirit. I first came to pray it thirty years ago this month, when I made my *Cursillo*, a weekend retreat for lay people with 20th Century origins in Spain. *Cursillo* just means “short course” or short walk, on a three-day weekend that moves toward a fresh way of being Christians in the world after the retreat. The specific model of retreat doesn't matter as much as the invitation to discover spiritual renewal on retreat, however that takes shape on

the Christian journey, so that the Spirit creates in us something new, revitalized. We all need such times of rest, renewal, conversion so that we can continue the sojourn of this Christian way and life.

I always think of this prayer when this passage about the Ethiopian courtesan rolls around every three years in our Sunday lectionary. Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love.

He has left the busy-ness of his life at court, filled with financial tasks that surely presented a full plate, a wearying workload, so he goes on spiritual pilgrimage, to Jerusalem, seeking

renewal. As he returns along the low desert highway, his heart sufficiently primed and a fire kindled, which is to say, the embers of faith are stirring as he seeks to discover how God may present to him in his post-retreat life.

He begins with Scripture, a passage from Isaiah the prophet. He is earnest in his desire for a fresh start, a faith seeking understanding. Many a person has traveled that road.

The words aren't much more than dried ink on the page for the pilgrim until Phillip shows up as evangelist, translator of good news, having been commissioned for such things by an angel who offers nothing more than a hint to head down the desert road—the road of desolation—and see what happens. So he does, another act of faith.

The two collide in some vortex of divine desert mystery. Conversation ensues, gifts given and received. Can you hear Phillip's enthusiastic telling of the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection? Can you see the Ethiopian hanging on every word?

Christian community is formed, and in the middle of the desert, an oasis of water appears. "What is to prevent me from being baptized," he asks his new friend. Hearts ablaze, they both go down into the water. Both of them, together. The ritual holds the sacred moment for both of them. Life is changed.

Phillip disappears, but the man's heart is stoked. He heads home rejoicing because joy is the natural response to having our hearts kindled with the fire of God's love for us. What good news it is!

It was St. Augustine who famously argued that faith need not be fully baked for us to believe that God is stirring in our midst. We need not understand divine revelation fully to experience it in life-changing ways, and it is precisely the desire to understand more fully that kindles our hearts to a deeper faith which elicits joy in our lives.

Centuries later St. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, coined the phrase: "faith seeking understanding,"

which invited human reason to be applied to the field of faith. We are invited to ask the questions of faith that seek deeper understanding of not just God's nature, but ours as well, and that of creation, and to frame it all by the fire of God's love that is the inspiration for the seeking in the first place.

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love.

The prayer from Cursillo continues: Send forth your Spirit, and we shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth.

Beyond whatever unfamiliar elements there are to this passage from Acts—Ethiopian queens and a eunuch on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, close encounters of conversion experience on a desolate road in the middle of the desert, getting baptized in the miraculous moment of fresh awareness—however foreign some aspects of this story may seem, the truth is this is our story, the Christian story, the human story really—seeking

renewal away from the hectic pace of daily life, fresh eyes for seeing, and the Spirit stirring among us and within us.

It is a beautiful story of conversion of life that comes when one is ready, and another has acceded to be midwife to the moment with little more prompting than a simple nudge to go, and to be present. Community forms, rituals lend meaning, lives are changed, rejoicing ensues.

This is the pattern for our Eucharistic community that gathers here on Sunday mornings to turn aside from the busy-ness of life and hear the story once more, hearts kindled, the ritual act guiding us to newfound joy. Lives changed, fortified for the journey from here.

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Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and

we shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth. Amen.

Acts 8:26-40 [An angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.” The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.]



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL