

Rekindle the Gift

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our light, our life, and our Lord, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Does anyone here like camping? After spending so much time living in a tent in Saudi Arabia during the Persian Gulf War, my idea of camping is poor room service at the Holiday Inn... (SLIDE) Even so, most of us have probably looked at the remains of a campfire the morning after and assumed the fire was cold and dead. The flames are gone. The wood has collapsed. Everything is covered with gray ashes. Back in the day, when I was a young Boy Scout, I remember getting up early and stirring up those ashes. Most of the time you could add a little kindling wood, blow on the embers, and before long you'd be cooking breakfast. My point is, the fire wasn't gone. It needed someone to tend it.

Paul believes something like this is happening within Timothy. Timothy's faith has not disappeared, but fear, grief, and weariness have begun to cover it. So, Paul writes, "I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you." Paul doesn't tell Timothy to go find a new fire. He doesn't say Timothy's faith was never genuine. He doesn't tell him to pretend that everything is fine. (SLIDE) Paul believes the gift is still there. The flame may be low, but God has not let it go out. Timothy certainly has reasons to be discouraged. His mentor and friend, Paul, is sitting in prison because he proclaimed the Gospel. The church is facing

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opposition. Following Jesus has not made life easier. Timothy may even be wondering whether he has enough courage, wisdom, or strength to continue.

Paul remembers Timothy's tears. His references to cowardice and shame suggest Timothy may be tempted to withdraw—to remain silent, to distance himself from Paul, or to avoid the suffering that might come from publicly identifying with Jesus. Paul doesn't shame Timothy for being afraid. He doesn't say, "Timothy, you're a disappointment. Pull yourself together!" Instead, Paul says, "Timothy, I remember you. I pray for you night and day. I remember your tears. I long to see you. (SLIDE) I remember your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice. And I remember the sincere faith that lives in you." Paul brushes away the ashes so that Timothy can see the ember again.

Timothy's faith has many fingerprints upon it. His grandmother Lois tended the flame. His mother Eunice tended the flame. Paul encouraged and instructed him. The community laid hands upon him and recognized God's calling... Most of us are here today because somewhere along the way, somebody tended the flame for us. Perhaps it was a parent or grandparent who taught you to pray. Perhaps someone brought you to Sunday school. Maybe a pastor spoke a word that stayed with you, or a church member noticed you, learned your name, and showed you that you belonged. Who tended the flame of faith for you? Even

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more importantly, whose flame might you be tending today—perhaps without even realizing it?

Paul reminds Timothy of Lois, Eunice, and the laying on of hands, but he does not tell Timothy to trust his family history, his training, or even the strength of his own faith. Paul directs Timothy toward something much stronger--the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Paul writes that God “saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace.” There’s the Gospel... “Not according to our works.” Timothy’s future does not depend upon his ability to produce enough courage. His salvation does not rest upon the strength of his faith. His calling does not depend upon his flawless performance. Everything begins with God’s grace. Before Timothy became frightened, grace was already his. Before Timothy succeeded or failed, God had already claimed him. Before Lois and Eunice taught him the faith, God had already determined to save through Jesus Christ. And Christ, Paul tells us, has “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”

(SLIDE) Paul may be in jail, but the Gospel cannot be imprisoned! Timothy may be frightened, but fear cannot separate him from Christ. Death may threaten them both, but Jesus Christ has robbed death of its final authority. That is why Paul can say, “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” Those three gifts belong together. Power without love

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can become domination. Love without power can become little more than a nice sentiment. Self-discipline without grace can become rigid self-reliance. The Good News is The Holy Spirit gives us power to act, love to guide our actions, and self-discipline to remain faithful. This isn't the world's kind of power. It *is* the power of the cross. It's the power to serve, forgive, endure, speak the truth, and continue loving when love is costly.

We may be separated from Timothy by nearly two thousand years, but we know something about fires that burn low. There are seasons when faith feels joyful and alive. Then, there are other seasons when we keep doing faithful things while feeling very little fire inside. Grief can cover the ember. So can illness, disappointment, exhaustion, seemingly unanswered prayers, worries about someone we love, or fear about the future. We may look around the church and remember when there were more children in Sunday school, more voices singing, and more people sitting in the pews. We can become so focused upon what appears to be missing that we overlook the embers God continues to keep alive among us.

(SLIDE) But look carefully... We can see the embers glowing when our quilters make something that will warm a person they may never meet. We see them when our children put together birthday kits so another child can celebrate. We see them when the prayer chain surrounds someone with prayer, when

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Communion is carried to someone who cannot be here, and when volunteers prepare to offer water and hospitality at the Great Darke County Fair. These are not merely church activities. They are signs that the Holy Spirit is still breathing upon the embers of our lives.

(SLIDE) “Rekindle the gift,” as Paul tells Timothy, does not mean, “Pray harder, believe harder, volunteer more, and stop feeling tired.” Sometimes rekindling begins by admitting, “I am tired. I am frightened. I need help.” Sometimes it begins by allowing someone else to pray for us. Sometimes another person sees the ember within us before we can see it ourselves. Most of all, rekindling begins by remembering what God has done. That is why, on Sundays when we aren’t celebrating Holy Communion or Holy Baptism, we gather around the font and give thanks for Baptism. We remember that we are joined to Christ, clothed with mercy and forgiveness, and claimed as children of God. We will soon have the joy of seeing those promises given to others. Next Sunday, a dad and his two children will receive this Holy and precious gift. Then, on August 23, we will gather around this font again as the promises of God are poured over another infant. (SLIDE) The waters of Baptism do not prove how you’ve now dedicated your life to God or how strongly any of us can hold onto God. They do prove how firmly God holds onto us. There are days when the flame of faith burns bright. There are other days when it seems buried beneath ashes, but God’s promise does

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not rise and fall with our emotions. At the font, God says: “You are mine. You are forgiven. You are joined to Christ. The Holy Spirit is at work within you.”

The Gospel is a strange kind of treasure. Paul tells Timothy to “guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.” We don’t guard it by keeping it to ourselves or locking it safely inside the church. We guard it by faithfully giving it away. Lois shared it with Eunice. Eunice shared it with Timothy. Paul encouraged Timothy to share it with others. Someone shared it with us. Now God entrusts it to us. Perhaps your fire is burning brightly today. If it is, use that flame to bring warmth and light to someone else. Perhaps your fire is burning low. If it is, don’t be ashamed. You are not alone, and God has not abandoned you. Remember your Baptism. Remember the people who tended your faith. Remember the Savior who abolished death and brought life into the light. The flame may be low, but God has not let it go out. Even now, the Holy Spirit is breathing upon the embers of our lives. Come, Holy Spirit and kindle in us the fire of your love. Amen.