

Light of Christ

My favorite service of the church year is the Great Vigil of Easter. I like it so much that it colors the entire fifty days of the Easter season. The Vigil begins mysteriously in semi-darkness around a newly kindled fire. Then hand-held candles are lit, there's a solemn procession into the church and lots of ancient chant. The readings stretch from the beginning of the world to that magic moment when the resurrection is proclaimed, the lights are thrown on, and we shout Alleluia! There is absolutely nothing like the Great Vigil.

Those who came to the service this year will remember that there was some difficulty in lighting the fire in the fire pit. I discovered that Sunday bulletins aren't nearly as flammable as I thought they were. Forward Day by Day burns much better. Afterwards someone gave me starter sticks to use next year to get the wood going. I suppose I should be embarrassed, but I'm not, even though I've spent many nights camping in the woods. Mostly I've camped where open fires were discouraged, so I've cooked on a tiny backpacking stove powered by Coleman fuel. Believe me, I am *not* going to start the Easter fire with Coleman fuel.

Eventually we got the fire going. Then we had the first magical moment of the service. Once the Paschal candle was lit, its flame was passed from one candle to another. Each person focused intently on their own candle as it was lit, and then turned to help someone else. All waited patiently in silence as the light of Christ slowly extended to the entire congregation. We could not move forward until the light had been passed to everyone.

Because that night stays with me throughout the Easter Season, I thought of it again when I read of the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch that we heard this morning. Just as we had passed the light of Christ to one another in the darkness before Easter Day, so Philip passed on the light that he had received.

Philip received the light when he was one of the seven commissioned as a deacon, earlier in the story. One of them, Stephen, had already lost his life for the faith. After Stephen's death, persecution scattered Christians far and wide. Philip found himself leaving Jerusalem and heading toward Gaza. On the way he encountered the Ethiopian – a distinguished foreigner, a court official in charge of the treasury, wealthy enough to have a chariot. He was also faithful enough to come to Jerusalem to worship and educated enough to be able to read.

As Philip ran up to the chariot, he heard the man reading out loud from the book of Isaiah. Philip asked that wonderfully evangelistic question: "Do you understand what you're reading?" The man said he didn't and invited Philip to join him. As soon as Philip got into the chariot, the light of Christ began to glow within the Ethiopian. Soon they came upon water, and the eunuch asked to be baptized. The light of Christ had been passed on and the two now parted. Philip was snatched away. The eunuch traveled home, taking the light of Christ with him, and Christianity began in Ethiopia, an ancient church tracing its origin to the apostles that is still alive today.

This morning we'll have another passing of the light of Christ, one that will be Spirit-filled and help make people whole. Today three people – Mary Hogg, Alvin Spencer, and Brenda Spencer – will be inducted into the International Order of St. Luke the Physician. They have spent many weeks in study, working with Mother Judith as Chaplain and Lynn Curtis as Convener, meeting with the Trinity people who already have this ministry: Dee Canfield, Margery Franklin, Keith Hoffman, Ann Hutchinson, Renee Long, and Joanne Stice. These are the ones who offer prayers and anointing for healing two Sundays a month here at the Cathedral. The New Testament has many stories of healing, and we rejoice that this ministry is among us.

The light of Christ is not limited to specialized ministries, however, nor does it appear only at certain times of the year. That light lies within all of us who have been baptized into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Each of us is sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever.

The light shines in many ways. St. John the Evangelist understood it as the love of God revealed through Jesus Christ. Ancient tradition holds that in old age, John's constant message was "love one another." Today we heard that in one of his letters, where he wrote, "Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another." In today's passage from John's Gospel, he focused on *abiding* in God's love, an organic connection through God the Son to God the Father, as physical as branches connected to the vine, rooted in the earth, tended by the vinegrower. What a wonderful set of images, as rich as passing on the light of Christ.

It will be another year before you can experience the wonder and mystery of the Great Vigil. If you want to put it on your calendar, the date is Saturday, April 20, 2019. But you don't have to wait until then to pass on the light of Christ. You can do it as soon as you turn to the person near you when you pass the peace. You can do it after the service. You can do it in the world every day of your life. Through Christ the Ethiopian went on rejoicing, and Philip was caught up by the Spirit. In Christ at the Great Vigil we shouted, Alleluia! Isn't it about time that you let that kind of joy into your life? Isn't it time to give someone else the light of Christ?

[Easter 5: Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8.]