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II Timothy 1:3-14
FAN THE FLAME OF FAITH

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A number of years ago one of our families donated an eternal light to the chancel of our church in memory of loved ones. Many people noticed the first few weeks and as good Lutherans asked the question, "What does this mean?" An eternal light symbolizes the presence of Christ who gives us his promise, "I am with you always, even to the very end of the age." But where do we find Christ? He is not hidden behind some bush or tree on our property, but rather he is clearly found where his Word is preached, and his Sacraments are rightly administered. The eternal light symbolizes the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar. Jesus' body and blood are not merely symbolized, but are actually present as Jesus tells us, "This is my body! This is my blood!" The color red symbolized the Holy Spirit who works through the Means of Grace to create, strengthen and keep faith going in the lives of his believers.

Many churches use wax candles. Ours is electronic. In either case it symbolizes that Christ will always shine in the midst of a sin-darkened world. The light of Christ will never go out. Have you looked at our eternal light lately? Would you notice if it went out? I'm guessing that some might, but many would not. You wouldn't notice obviously if you weren't in church. You probably wouldn't notice if you were in church very infrequently. You wouldn't notice if you were distracted by other things. I'll be honest. I don't always notice it myself, but when I enter a darkened church, I see it there. It gives light so that I can find my way.

Faith is like that, isn't it? It can flicker and threaten to go out. There are always threats to our faith. In good times we have complacency. Everything is viewed as "same old, same old." What do we have at church today? Well, we will sing hymns, confess our sins, and receive Holy Absolution, listen to some readings from Scripture, have a sermon, pray, and receive the Sacrament. "So, didn't we have basically the same things last week? So, what would I miss if I didn't go?" That's how many people would view it.

In hard times Satan is always working. "So where is God now? Would a loving God let you lose your job or get sick or let you have all these problems in your relationships with those you love the most?" He leads you to take your eyes off the cross (or the eternal light) and look to other things. He wants you to try to find your own solutions to life's problems. He wants you to try other people's solutions that certainly don't include God. He will lead you to stop caring and to look inward, looking only to yourself. He will lead you to want to withhold forgiveness and share it only with those who truly deserve it, which is almost no one.

St. Paul faced temptations as well. This was the very last letter that the Apostle wrote. It was written from prison in Rome. Now Paul had written letters from prison before. This one was different. In other cases, Paul was simply under house arrest. He was free to have visitors and to even go places. He was certain that he would be released and free to go. Tradition holds that Paul made another missionary trip to Spain. This time he was "chained like a criminal." Paul would face execution under the Roman emperor Nero. This letter was most likely written in his last year, shortly before his execution.

What was Paul's mood? He was not looking at life under Christ as worthless and wasted. He was certainly disappointed that some had deserted him and the Gospel, but he was joyful for what the Lord had accomplished through him.

Timothy was very special to him. Timothy was like a son. He was a young pastor and Paul was going to encourage him. Paul was chained like a criminal. What could Paul do? First of all, he tells Timothy, "I constantly remember you in my prayers." A couple of weeks we talked once again about the importance of prayer. Paul told us to pray for all people. Paul certainly had a prayer list and Timothy was one of those on the very top of that list. How important is prayer? It is the first thing that missionaries will ask for. "Pray for us!" We all have different times in our lives. When we are young, we may not have a lot of money, but we can volunteer our time doing many different tasks. As we get older, perhaps we can't do all the physical tasks we once could, but the Lord has blessed us financially so that we can support the work of the church to a greater level. Finally, we reach a point where we may not have a lot of physical strength or money. But we have a lot of time, time to pray for the work of our Lord Jesus and the gospel.

Timothy is urged to fan into flame the gift of God. Specifically, here Paul is talking about Timothy's ordination into the Office of the Holy Ministry, but he is also talking about faith. Where do pastors come from? A few enter the ministry in spite of their family. Most will enter it because of their family. Timothy had some wonderful role models in his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois. They taught him the Holy Scriptures and what they meant. Certainly, they would have talked about the promised Messiah who was to come. They would have celebrated the Passover and other festivals. They would have taught him a proper love for God and his fellow man. Timothy had a sincere faith.

We cannot stress enough the importance of the Christian family and the impact it makes upon the young. First of all, we have our children baptized. That brings us into God's kingdom, members of God's very family. We are marked forever with the sign of the holy cross. Our sins are taken away as far as the East is from the West.

Then comes teaching. Children love to have their parents read and tell stories. While children might enjoy books like "The Cat in the Hat" and "Green Eggs and Ham," parents know that they have to let their children know the wonderful acts of God. They will tell them about Creation and Adam and Eve and Abraham and Moses and David. They will above all tell them about Jesus. They will tell the story of Christmas and the birth of our Lord. They will tell them about Jesus' miracles that he did showing himself to be the very Son of God. They will speak of his death on the cross to take away all our sins and they will tell them about his resurrection on Easter. Some details of stories might have to come as children get older, but even the smallest child can understand, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so!" You bring the child to Sunday School and Lutheran grade school. You have your child go through confirmation instruction with the Pastor and look forward to the big day of confirmation. You make use of the Lutheran high school if possible.

The time will come when children will ask the question, "Is this really true? Can I believe what I've heard all my life?" There are many college professors and others who will try to lead them astray and fall from faith. They may have a number of friends who are not Christian who will encourage them to do something else. We always want to get them back to the source, the Holy Scriptures. There we have all the answers to the questions of life. Are we doing our job of being role models? Our children are perceptive. They can see that if we do seem to care much about going to church, then why should they be any different?

Do we pray for our teens and college students, that they remain firm in their baptismal grace and conformational vows? A survey taken a number of years ago had 50% of those in the 15-23-year-old age bracket agree with this statement: "Hardly anyone in the congregation would miss me if I stopped going to church!" That is really

scary! Our youth will often encounter a lot of negativity. When I was in college, my hair was down to my shoulders. I got quite a few comments. Maybe it is the latest in fashion or a man wearing an earring or getting a tattoo. What does any of that matter? We should be concerned for their souls!

There are no perfect parents. There are many things I have tried to teach my children. I have tried to teach them responsibility and independence and the importance of sending thank you notes and being kind and many other things. I hope that I have taught them the importance of having Christ as the center of your life and your marriage and your family.

Paul was there to encourage Timothy. What kinds of gifts did Timothy have? Was he a great preacher or teacher? Did he have a strong personality? Every pastor will encounter opposition. Sometimes it comes from outside the congregation, sometime from within. It is easy to be timid, to not speak up. Paul does not want to see a "timid Timothy." God gives us power and love and self-discipline.

I always enjoy going to our Pastors' Conference. We have gotten a lot of new men in our District in the past few years. I have been in our conference for the last 28 years. There aren't too many pastors who have been in our conference longer. I was very impressed with our new men. They have received many gifts from our gracious Lord. I believe that our congregations are very blessed. They do need encouragement. Even though they may have a number of gifts that I don't, I still have one thing that they don't, and that is 43 years of experience in the parish ministry. We all encounter the highest highs and the lowest lows. As you gain experience, things are on a much more level plain. We need to pray for our pastors and encourage them.

We have the same power and the same Jesus that Paul and Timothy had. Have you ever built a fire? You start very small, with paper and leaves and small twigs. You start putting on larger pieces of wood. But fires will go out. You have to stir up the dying embers. You use bellows and put on more wood.

We must keep fanning the flame of faith. That means Word and Sacrament. It may not sound like much: a sermon each week, daily Meditations, and devotions, going to the Lord's Supper every time it is offered. Our earthly lives are sustained by a sandwich, a piece of fruit, vegetables, and water. Paul says, "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day. What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus."

We know who is with us: the God who planned and carried out our salvation through his Son Jesus. Trust him! He won't leave you. Fan into flame the gift of faith! AMEN.