

Third Sunday after Easter, Year C
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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(The two fires in John were brought to my attention by Dr. Audrey West.)

Happy Easter, everyone. Easter is indeed a season. It is the 50 days following Easter Sunday. Fifty days of feasting as a response to the 40 days of Lent. In God's economy, life always wins over death, and the church shows that by inviting us to celebrate Easter ten day longer than we observed Lent. Love wins. Life wins. Easter wins.

Some of you no doubt have attended an Easter Vigil at one time in your lives. If you haven't, it's the long evening service that takes place the night before Easter. Think of it like the Christmas Eve Midnight Mass but on the night before Easter. It's one of the richest — and longest — services of the year: darkness and light, candles, music, bells, smoke, and a big bonfire. If you've never experienced an Easter Vigil, I encourage you to do it at least once in your life; it's one of the few Christian services that you might say is a true spectacle, and they host a Vigil each year at our Cathedral.

The bonfire at the Easter Vigil is usually prepared just outside of the front doors of a darkened church. The idea is that the church is like Jesus' tomb — dark and quiet. And, once the fire is kindled, the Paschal candle (this big white one right here) is lit for the year and Christ's presence lights the church, defeating death and bringing light back into the world.

It's a gorgeous symbol, the Easter fire. As with all things that are gorgeous in church, someone has to actually figure out a way to do it. The first year of my priesthood, the task of lighting the Easter Fire at the Easter Vigil fell to me. I grew up in the woods and was quite confident I'd have no problem lighting a little fire. But the organist and choirmaster, who had been there for 30 years, pulled me aside and told me that he didn't want a smokey fire 'cause it would make the choir's robes stink. I had been a priest for nine months; he had been a choirmaster for 30 years. I decided to look for a smokeless fire.

It turns out, you can make quite a nice fire with alcohol and Epsom salt. So, I practiced it in my office a few times and determined that I had it all figured out. The night of the Easter Vigil, at the prayer over the flames, I lit the alcohol in the basin just like I had practiced in my office. Nothing happened. The Chicago wind had evaporated the alcohol quicker than I'd anticipated, and we were standing there with no flame and a number of puzzled Christians. I mumbled something noncommittal and kind of lit the Easter candle with some matches while hurrying everyone into the sanctuary. It wasn't my finest liturgical moment, but it seems that God can make use of whatever fire is available, and Easter happened anyway.

Why do I bring up a fire? The Gospel today is filled with strange characters and stories — far too many for one sermon. If you want to learn why Peter is naked, you'll have to come back next

Easter season to hear about it. Instead, I want to talk about the fire on the banks of the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus met with his disciples and broke bread after he was raised from the dead.

Imagine all the disciples sitting there with their Lord who they had believed was dead. They mourned him terribly, and yet there he sits, doing with them what he always taught — sharing bread with one another. A really careful reader will remember that this is the second time Peter sits at a charcoal fire in the Passion story. On Good Friday, Peter sat at a fire in the palace courtyard while Jesus was being interrogated by Pilate. At that fire, Peter denied that he had ever been a disciple of Jesus three times, just as Jesus had predicted.

So, the audience, us, should immediately draw a connection between the fire of betrayal on the night of the Passion to the fire of peace and fellowship at the Resurrection. And Peter, the rock on whom Christ will build the church, found himself at both fires.

Imagine the kind of God who would invite a betrayer to break bread over a campfire after a night of fishing. Imagine what it must have felt like for Peter to sit there, sharing bread with Jesus, knowing that he had betrayed his Lord.

That's the thing about this story that sits with me. Peter is still somehow invited to this breakfast, to this fire.

And Jesus' invitation to Peter tells me two things: 1. There is nothing that you can do or imagine that Jesus has not already forgiven you for and 2. If we are to follow Jesus, we are to live into this example of radical hospitality.

I want you to think about the news stories that you've read in the last week. I want you to think of the most despicable character in the news that you can imagine for the recent headlines. When you have a miserable person in mind, I want you to imagine what it would be like to invite this person to share a seat with you at a campfire and to share a simple meal of bread and fish. It's nearly impossible to imagine, isn't it?

And yet, that's the call. We who follow Jesus are asked to offer ourselves to the other just as Jesus has first offered himself to Peter. Even when the other is a miserable human being. Even when that person is a betrayer like Peter. Even when that miserable human is ourselves.

This is a tale of two fires: one where Peter is the betrayer, and one where Peter is forgiven and reconciled to God. You will spend some time at both of these fires, I imagine, over the course of a long Christian life.

But remember this: we are to invite the most unlikely ones to share in God's meal because God has first offered himself to us. God wants to sit with us, to break bread and share warmth — even when we don't deserve it. And then we are tasked to invite others to God's fire — even the unlikely, even our enemies. Amen.