

My friends in Christ, in our Gospel text from Saint Luke, Jesus says, “I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!” And how interesting (perhaps *concerning?*) that we are given *this* Gospel passage – with Jesus saying *this* about setting the world on fire – now in the middle of August when, as often as not, our world here in the inland northwest *literally* is burning! I sure do hope that Jesus does not mean this *literally*!

And well, of course He does *not* mean it literally. But He *does* mean it. He wishes that all of us and all the world were blazing with the holy fire of faith, with everyone so excited and filled with such intense energy and zeal to speak about their Jesus-encounter with everyone *else*! I mean, all of us remember when the Seahawks won the Super Bowl, and we were blowing it up when we shared that awesome news with everyone; and we blow it up again each time the Zags make it deep in the tournament any given year; and we blow it up whenever the Mariners manage to do, well, *anything*!

We are an excitable people; we get so excited about a lot of things, for a lot of reasons; and that is *good*. We get excited about a really great movie that we just saw, telling all of our friends that they just *have* to go see it – they just *have* to! The latest Marvel comics film – what is it, up to *ten* of them in theaters so far this year? Maybe *more*? Anyway, a lot of people get so excited about them.

Why? Why are we so excited about our favorite sports teams winning, or about super hero movies? It is because they have a compelling and engaging story to tell – those good guys squaring off against the evil villains (the Mariners against the Yankees – boo, hiss!). And because of *that*, we find ourselves *so* invested in the outcome.

So it is *also* in real life; on June 7th, 1944, you *know* that the good guys in Europe, when they heard the news of the day before, were singing and dancing, laughing and celebrating because they *obviously* were *very* deeply invested in the breaking of Fortress Europa and the longed-for liberation and freedom of all of the people who were being oppressed and tyrannized by Nazi Germany.

And *now*, in today's Gospel text, we hear it directly from Jesus Himself – how excited *He* is for what is *about* to happen in the *Greatest Story Ever Told* – *not* the story of the Mariners *versus* the Yankees, or the story of Marvel super heroes finding the infinity stones (or whatever is the plot *du jour*), and not *even* the story of the Allies breaking the Axis...but the *Greatest Story Ever Told*. The story...of our salvation.... And, again, Jesus is just *so* excited for this story, *so* ready to blow it up, that He is *bursting* to set the earth on fire – the holy fire of faith – and wishes that our world were already blazing with this holy fire.

Last week, we reflected upon the most important thing ever: our faith in Jesus – which is to *know* Him (*truly* know Him) – embracing our personal faith in Him and sharing that faith with *others*, thus to help *them*, too, to know Him and to have faith in Him. And simply telling our own personal story of how and when and where we encountered Jesus...so small a thing, such a little thing for us to do that...and yet, so *powerful* a thing.

I mean, I can stand here and wax poetic with great theological discourse all I want and *maybe* that *might* be compelling enough for a *few* people to ask me later on, “Uh huh – and *then* what?” But a *story* is just way more effective – just way more powerful. And *your* story of when *you* encountered Jesus, or *my* story, or *that* person's story, or *that* person's story...*now* there is a plot arc involved with that deeply personal investment because we want to *know* what happens *next*, and we want to know that the good guys *win*.

And we, who are a people of faith, who strive to be disciples of Jesus Christ – we just have to understand that we really and truly *do* have the *most* compelling story of *all* – and it is the *Greatest Story Ever Told*: the story of our salvation.... But whereas people just go crazy every time Marvel releases its *latest* carbon-copy iteration of the same old tired plot with the same old tired characters and the same old overblown special effects...those *same* people yawn and go “ho-hum” whenever the Name of Jesus is said – let *alone* whenever we try to proclaim the Gospel to them. And *that* is

because we are just not telling it right; and we are not telling it right likely because we *ourselves* are not excited about it; and we *ourselves* are not excited about it because, long ago, we jettisoned this and have totally lost the sense of *why* it is important in the *first* place – *why* it is important, *why* it is compelling, *why* it truly *is* the *Greatest* Story Ever Told.

I mean, the world is *broken*, my friends – fallen and broken because of sin and death. Now, God *made* it *good*...but then *we* made it *bad*, thank you very *much*, Adam and Eve! We were made by God to be good and holy, to live *forever* in sweet bliss...but now all of that *ruined*. We *were* going to live forever but *now* we are going to die! Stark, blunt, awkward truth – no matter the vitamins that we ingest, no matter our health or the exercise that we do, no matter the advancements in medical technology, we *will* die, and *sin* is why. And this is not just *bad* news – it is the *worst* news! It is the *worst* thing *ever*! When you die, you die – cut-and-dry, that-is-it – with nothing else but eternal and everlasting void waiting for us in the end. God made us good – made us for *Paradise*. But *then* we went nuts and managed to screw it all up, so guess what? Sorry, folks: death, and lots *of* it; *that* is our inheritance *now*. Good-bye, Heaven – hello, hell!

...And *that* would have been our sad story – that *was* our sad story...were it not for Christ Jesus and His great Rescue Mission of *saving* us from that. We *were* falling into an infinite abyss of cold, dark, unending death – but Jesus reached down from the cross and took us by the hand and raised us up and saved us. And we say to Him, “Whew, that was a *close* one!” But even *more* than *that*, as *awesome* as *that* is...Jesus does even *more* for us; He calls us His *friends*...His grace makes us His *family*...and He invites us to come home...*His* Home...the *true* Paradise: Heaven.

But again...something *clearly* is wrong in how we are telling the story. For *whatever* reason, we are just not telling it right. We are not telling it right because for *whatever* reason we are simply not excited about it. And we are not excited about it because for *whatever* we lost the sense of *why*

this is so important in the *first* place – again, *why* it is important, and *why* it is compelling, and *why* it truly *is* the *Greatest* Story Ever Told.

So...what is the answer to this conundrum? Well, it *could* be perhaps that, like the child said to Saint Augustine at the final moment of his conversion, we “take up and read.” It *could* be that we all just need to find our Bibles lost somewhere in the house, dust it off, crack open its never-before-opened pages, and read the Greatest Story Ever Told that lies hidden therein. Yes, we all definitely could benefit in doing *that*...but there is something even *easier*, *much* more *simple* – and I have said it *before* and in all likelihood I *will* mention this *again*: we do well to take it to prayer – personal prayer, quiet and alone with God...and we think back on our lives and we dive deep into the memories of when we knew – we just *knew* – that we had that personal and powerful encounter with the Person of Jesus Christ. And I am willing to bet a lot of money...even the parish savings account, if I were allowed to do that...that your personal and powerful encounter with Jesus happened during a time in your life when you were *wounded*, when you were *hurting*, when you were *alone*...and there in that very moment...is when you met Jesus. You *encountered* Him; you *knew* Him; and in that encounter, that very moment, you professed your faith in Him (*Credo in unum Deum*; “I put my belief *into* God, *into* the one Lord Jesus Christ, *into* the Holy Spirit”).

You were *one* way *before*, back *then* – wounded and hurt and alone...but *now*, you are a totally different person – someone *better*, someone *more*...and what happened between *then* and *now*...what it was that changed you forever...was *Him*.... It was *Jesus*.

Proclaiming *the* Gospel to others might still yet be a bridge too far for a lot of us...but what about proclaiming *your* Gospel, *your* Good News of *your* personal and powerful relationship with the Lord? Because *the* Gospel, the *kerygma* that tells of how we were *Created by God* but then we screwed up so that now we are *Captured in sin*, and then Jesus found us, lifted us up, pulled us out so that *now*

we are *Rescued in Christ*... That story, that *kerygma*, that Gospel...it is the *same* story arc for *each* of us as it is for *all* of us and for all the *world*.

Because I *know* that I was Created by God, and I was created *good* – made *imago Dei*; made in the image and likeness of God; a work of art; a cherished treasure. Each of us should take a look at a childhood picture of ourselves someday...and really *look* at it...and we *will* see the irrefutable *truth* of our fundamental goodness, that we *are* works of art and cherished treasures.

But as we look, we will begin to wonder, “What happened?” What went wrong? What did we do to screw things up so *badly*? Why in the world did I do *that*...or *that*...or *that*? Look at what an awful mess I made of life when I said those things, did those things.... And as *surely* as we knew that once upon a time we were Created by God – that we were created *good*...*just* as surely, we will know that we are now Captured in sin.

And now comes the crucial moment in our personal, private reflections on these extremely sensitive matters: where did we encounter Jesus? We hear it said so frequently that Jesus meets us where we are – but where *was* that, exactly? Because *that*...is where we are Rescued by Christ; *that*, you see, is when the Heavenly Healer gave us healing, where our loving Lord called us to Himself and made us His chosen friends, where the Bread of Life nourished us in our desperate need.... I was *one way before*, back *then* – wounded and hurt and alone...but *now*, I am totally different...and what happened between *then* and *now*...was *Him*....

Jesus came to set the world on fire, and how He wishes it were already blazing – blazing in the holy fires of our faith in Him.... May it be, then, that the world will burn...and that our hearts will burn within us...and that the world blazing because of the Word on fire *will* bring salvation to all...for every soul, and for all the world.