

Campfire
Transition Sermon (Lectionary from Proper 23)
August 21, 2016
Trinity Bixby

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7
Luke 17: 11-19

There's something special about a campfire after the sun has gone down. It doesn't really matter how hot it is outside, or who you're camping with - the light and warmth of the campfire is always welcome. It's familiar. It's like a portable home. Now, as a Scout, we had to learn how to build fires safely, whether it was dry as a bone, so that we had to dig the pit deep, and far away from any tinder or so soaking wet that we had to hold a tarp over the fire while it was starting up! There's a few important things to keep in mind: first, you have to arrange the wood. You can't just dump a mix of sizes and shapes into the fire pit – well, you CAN, but it doesn't catch quickly nor burn evenly. What you want to do is make a lean-to or a log cabin with your wood, so that big logs support smaller branches, which support twigs and kindling. Fires start small, and grow – and arranging the wood ahead of time is your best way of keeping the fire manageable after it's been started.

Next, you need to apply heat – from friction of rubbing sticks together, if you're primitive camping, or from a match or lighter if you're using tech to make life easier! Once the kindling goes, the fire will produce its own heat, but every campfire must be started by applying heat in some way. Lastly, a fire needs air – oxygen – to burn. The more oxygen available, the hotter and brighter the fire will burn, and the faster the fire will use up its fuel. That's why you fan coals, or blow into the fire after adding new logs – to jumpstart the process again. So, for any fire, you need to first arrange wood, then apply heat, and make sure to keep a steady supply of air!

With that fire going, it's like you've got a piece of home with you, no matter where you are. Imagine how important that comfort would be if you were exiled like the Judeans and Israelites! That's the situation we find in Jeremiah 29. Four years have passed since the exile in Babylon began, and though rebellious sentiment is certainly running through Judah, the Babylonians are simply too powerful for a rebellion to succeed. The skilled artisans, many of the priests, and the political families have all been exiled into Babylon, leaving the unskilled laborers behind. Jeremiah, though a prophet, has not been exiled, and is writing from Jerusalem after the temple has been destroyed. Instead of inciting rebellion in the capital of their captor's Empire, Jeremiah tells the people to settle in. "Marry, plant gardens, and seek the Shalom of the city where you are exiled," he writes. That is, arrange the fuel where you are – know that you have to prepare for a long captivity, and it's easier to survive when you can have that piece of home and life to live.

Now, Jeremiah tells the people to "seek the Shalom" of their exiled city. Shalom in Hebrew means both peace and wholeness – it's a wish that everything is "well with your soul," of being fully present to your situation. It's used as a greeting and a farewell, and shows up everywhere in the Bible. To seek shalom means to try to make whole what is broken – to seek peace through wholeness instead of destruction. Here, in exile, that brokenness is especially felt – families separated by a 900 mile journey, the same distance as from Tulsa to Detroit, but made on foot! Not only that, but how do you have a community apart from the temple? Well, Jeremiah is saying to make a community apart from the Temple. That though the people are far away from home, God is in their midst, too – and they should seek to put things right that once went wrong. (And yes, that's basically the plot of Quantum Leap – a great example of seeking shalom no matter where – or when – you find yourself!)

You see, when we forgive others, we create sparks of Shalom. When we reunite what has been broken, we rekindle the warm fire of Shalom. And that is how we apply spiritual heat! In our Gospel message today, we see Jesus seeking the shalom of the outcast people in the town he happens to find himself in. Ten people with skin conditions – not leprosy as we know it today, but various skin conditions that might be equally as contagious – call out to Jesus in the distance. Jesus tells them to show themselves to the priests. Normally, that's what you do as the last step – to prove that you are no longer showing signs of the skin condition. But these people, pushed to the edges of their community, immediately do what Jesus tells them to do, and all are healed on their way. One of them, seeing his condition healed, returns to Jesus before doing what Jesus said to do! He's so overcome with gratitude that he has to come back immediately to thank Jesus. And Jesus praises him, and lifts him up as an example. But here's the thing: the man who returned is a Samaritan, a group of people who were often ostracized by their distant relatives, the Jewish people. Jesus has provided shalom in healing the man's skin AND the man's standing. One who was low is brought high. The coals of community have been fanned into the warm campfire of shalom.

The same spark that lit the campfires of the exiles, the disciples, and the tongues of flame of Pentecost is still with us today. Like the exiled people of Judah, we are called to arrange the fuel of our fire by living life as God calls us to – and apply heat to the community by seeking its shalom, continuing to lift each other up and fan the flames by praise and gratitude, to God and to each other. Then, God's light and warmth will truly be felt by all.

May you seek Shalom for your community and the nation and the world. May the gifts of Christ Jesus fill you with healing words and deeds. May you always praise God and each other when the Spirit draws you to do good things.