REKINDLING THE FLAME

II Timothy 1:3-14

Find your way on your knees, in your head, and with your hands.

A sermon preached by
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When I moved to Durham, North Carolina, to go to seminary at Duke, I had never lived close to the ocean before. I was still three hours away from the coast, but I became fascinated with the maritime region, particularly a stretch of barrier islands called the Outer Banks. The Outer Banks stretch from Kitty Hawk to Emerald Isle, and they are just beautiful.

Being a landlubber from LA (lower Arkansas), I had never seen lighthouses in person. But I soon visited all five lighthouses on the Outer Banks: Currituck, Bodie Island, Cape Hatteras, Ocracoke, and Cape Lookout. Each one is unique and historic.

The function of a lighthouse is two-fold. First is warning. Lighthouses have been used since ancient times to warn ships that they are approaching land. The Cape Hatteras lighthouse sends its beam out over the Diamond Shoals, a treacherous patch of shallow water that is known as "the Graveyard of the Atlantic," because so many ships have wrecked there.

The second function is guidance. If a ship is sailing up the coast or down the coast, it can chart its course by keeping the lighthouses in view to the port or starboard side, depending on which way they are going.

When your pastors were planning sermons for the New Year, we thought about the image of lighthouses. (All three of us saw these particular lighthouses when we were at Duke.) We are in the season of Epiphany, and Epiphany is often called the season of light. Epiphany is about the manifestation or the appearance of God in Jesus Christ. It begins with the Christmas star guiding the Wise Men, and it ends with the light of the glory of God on the Mount of Transfiguration. In this season, we usually focus on evangelism (sharing the light) and discipleship (being the light in the world). So it’s like the Gospel is the light, and we are little lighthouses spreading the light of Christ. God is here to guide us and keep us safe, and we are here to share the warning and the guidance of God in the
community and the world. Thus the theme: Lighthouse—Finding Your Way.

When Paul wrote his letters to Timothy, he was giving his young friend in ministry some lighthouse wisdom, warning and guiding him in the Christian way. There are many words of good advice in these letters. Paul wrote to Timothy to encourage him in many of the same issues that we face—relationships with family, making ends meet, right teaching about the faith, conflict in the church, and keeping the internal spiritual fire burning. These are matters we deal with every day, whether we are in full-time ministry or not. They are crucial issues for every Christian if we are going to find our way in life.

So how do we find our way forward? That’s a good question for the beginning of the year. What does the path look like? Where can we go for answers to this fundamental question?

I think we find our way, first of all, **ON OUR KNEES**. Our mission in life is found and formed in a conversation with our heavenly Father. God has a plan and a purpose for each of our lives, and we cannot figure that out unless we spend some time with God. We can have a personal relationship with God, and he will guide our lives in an individual, personal way.

As you look through the Bible, virtually every leader charged with a great mission for the Kingdom found his or her guidance in a conversation with God. Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Paul, and certainly Jesus—everyone got his or her bearings in prayer. We find our way on our knees (or in whatever posture you pray in).

Tomorrow we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, and like every spiritual leader, King got his direction in prayer. Coretta Scott King, his widow, recalled, “Prayer was a wellspring of strength and inspiration during the Civil Rights Movement. Throughout the movement, we prayed for greater human understanding. We prayed for the safety of our compatriots in the freedom struggle. We prayed for victory in our nonviolent protests, for brotherhood and sisterhood among people of all races, for reconciliation and the fulfillment of the
Beloved Community. For my husband, Martin Luther King, Jr., prayer was a daily source of courage and strength that gave him the ability to carry on in even the darkest hours of our struggle.”

Coretta remembered the night when Martin came home during a very difficult period of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956. Exhausted and bone-weary, he was awakened in the middle of the night by a threatening and abusive phone call, one of many he received.

After the call, King got up from bed and made himself some coffee. He began to worry about his family, and the burden of leadership weighed heavily on his soul. With his head in his hands, Martin bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud to God: “Lord, I am taking a stand for what I believe is right. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I have come to the point where I can’t face it alone.”

At that moment, Coretta said Martin experienced the presence of the Divine as he had never experienced God before. It seemed as though a voice were saying: “Stand up for righteousness; stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.” When Martin stood up from the table, he was filled with a new sense of confidence, determination, and direction. He had found his way.

We also find our way **IN OUR HEAD.** Prayer is primary, but understanding God’s will for our lives also involves knowing the Bible, the Christian faith, and the history of the church. We have to study up on the things of God. Being ignorant is not bliss; it is a barrier to the Spirit. The prologue to the Book of Proverbs puts it bluntly: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

It’s no accident that we emphasize Christian education or discipleship training around our church. It’s not just so we can monopolize your time. Our job, as Paul defines it, is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,
Learning the faith in the fellowship of believers is a key to your effectiveness as a disciple of Jesus. Getting into the Word is absolutely crucial if you want to grow as a Christian.

That’s the mission of our small groups every week. That’s the purpose of our Sunday School classes and Bible studies, our youth Bible studies, children’s ministries, and all the other learning activities we do—to equip the saints, to build up the body, to mature the believers. When you are involved in a learning activity, you will have a better sense of your spiritual direction. You find your way in your head.

Stories abound about people having a moment of insight from Scripture that sparked a spiritual revolution. Martin Luther (the reformer for whom the civil rights leader was named), had pondered over Romans 1:17 for years—“For in [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’” Suddenly one day he understood that this meant that God gives us his righteousness when we respond to his grace with faith, and that salvation comes not by works, but by faith alone. This powerful insight rekindled Luther’s flame and started the Protestant Reformation.

Two hundred years later, John Wesley, at the point of doubt and despair over his faith, heard Luther’s commentary on Romans read at a prayer meeting in Aldersgate Street. Wesley felt his heart “strangely warmed,” and he said, “I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.” It was like the light came on. It was like the fire was rekindled. It was like God showed him the way.

We find our way on our knees (prayer), in our head (learning), and WITH OUR HANDS. Nothing substitutes for getting your hands dirty—maybe literally—in the service of the Kingdom. Finding

until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”
meaning and purpose in life is born in prayer and nurtured by learning, but walking with God is more than an intellectual exercise. It’s a physical exercise of the gifts God has given you to serve God and God’s children. That’s how we find our way.

Finding some way to serve others is a key factor in having a life full of meaning and purpose and joy and peace. In a recent study, researchers took 132 patients with multiple sclerosis (MS), a progressive and degenerative and incurable disease. They divided them into two groups. One group met weekly to learn coping skills, and one group met weekly with five other MS patients who had been trained to give support to others who suffered from the disease. The goal was to see which group’s health fared better, those learning coping skills or those hearing from another MS patient.

The surprise finding was that neither group fared as well as did the five MS sufferers who had been trained to offer support. The study found that "giving support improved health more than receiving it." Those five MS patients felt a dramatic change in their lives: less depressed, more self-confident, and higher self-esteem. The main researcher said, "These people had undergone a spiritual transformation that gave them a refreshed view of who they were." Caring for others brought healing for the caregivers.5

Effective, complete discipleship involves prayer, learning, and service. We find our way on our knees, in our head, and with our hands. Paul tells Timothy the results of a life lived this way: “For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”6 That’s what you get: a spirit of power and love and self-discipline. Then Paul goes on to write, “I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.”7

That’s the way I want to live! Not in a spirit of cowardice, but in a spirit of power and love and self-discipline. I do not want to be
ashamed of the beliefs I have or the message I share. I want to live and teach and walk and witness so that I will not be ashamed when the day comes and I hand the treasure of this life back to the One who gave it to me to use. That’s what lights my fire! How about you?

One of the most interesting things that ever happened to the North Carolina lighthouses was the time they moved the Cape Hatteras lighthouse. When it was built in 1870, it was 1500 feet from shore. But beach erosion and the slow migration of the island left it almost in the surf by the 1980’s. One big storm and the whole lighthouse might have toppled into the ocean.

They debated for years how to best preserve the lighthouse or to tear it down and rebuild it, and finally they decided it would be more cost-effective to move it. It would preserve a historic landmark as well. So in the summer of 1999, they moved the tallest lighthouse in the world. It was a complicated process, but basically they jacked the whole thing up and put it on rollers and rolled it, five feet at a time, for three weeks, until it came to rest on a new foundation 2900 feet back from the beach. In that location, the engineers say it should be safe for another hundred years.

Maybe that is a good image for our life and faith today. We live in a world where the sand is shifting all the time. Everything is changing around us, and our foundation is in danger. The waves are crashing against us, and one good storm in our lives could topple the whole structure.

Maybe you need to move to a place that is more secure. You can’t stay where you are; you can’t be like you’ve always been and expect to survive or to thrive in this environment. You can’t spread the light without a solid foundation. Maybe it’s time to move. Jack up your discipleship and start making progress toward higher ground. Spend time with God in prayer; study the Word; serve others with the love of Christ. This will rekindle the gift of God that is within you, and you will find the way.
2 Proverbs 1:7.
6 II Timothy 1:6-7.
7 II Timothy 1:11-12.
8 [https://www.nps.gov/caha/learn/historyculture/movingthelighthouse.htm](https://www.nps.gov/caha/learn/historyculture/movingthelighthouse.htm).