

A-First Sunday after Christmas  
St. Luke's, Renton, WA  
Kevin Pearson

John 1.1-18

I was never much of a Boy Scout, but did grow up in a rural-enough environment to have learned a lot about the out-of-doors. I picked up a few things about earth, wind, and fire, if not by doing, at least by watching. In my family each of us boys had chores. My middle brother fed the cows and mucked out the barn and I was responsible for feeding the dog and chopping kindling. My father built a fire most mornings, so mine was a chore that didn't go unnoticed, especially when I failed to perform it.

Therefore, if there's something I know about, it's kindling. I know how much it takes, (how little one can get by on), and I know that all the matches and newspaper in the world aren't going to get alder to burn on its own. Being one for short-cuts, I have come to learn this by many attempts, using boxes of matches and bundles of paper, and not a little amount of blowing. The result is always a quick flash, a magnificent burst of flame and a lot of ash. A good fire requires kindling and dry cedar is the best.

So you can imagine that the image provided in today's Christmas collect: "Almighty God ... grant that the new light of your incarnate Word, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives ..." You can imagine the image of this prayer sparks my attention. Grant that the new light of your incarnate Word, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives.

The prayers and spirituality of the Celtic people in Ireland and Scotland are filled with images of home and hearth and kindling the fire of the Spirit. There, peat was used to fuel the fire. And kindling a fire usually meant lifting up the already-glowing embers of peat that had been carefully banked and "smoorred" with ash the night before. Kindling meant rustling the fire to life again. In truth, the fire never went out; it was enlivened in the morning and carefully shielded at night.

The Celts had wonderful prayers that went along with these actions. One such morning prayer went like this:

I will kindle my fire this morning  
In the presence of the holy angels of heaven.  
God kindle Thou in my heart within  
A flame of love to my neighbour,  
To my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all

Like this prayer, our collect—the prayer that collects us together in common prayer at the beginning of our liturgy—... our collect invites the new light of our God's incarnate Word to be kindled in our hearts that it may shine forth in our lives.

At Christmas we celebrate the new birth of this incarnate Word. Jesus is the "articulation", the "communication", the "Word" of God expressed in human form. The new light of the Christ shined in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome the light. As we rehearse and remember the light coming into the world, perhaps new light is shed on our lives and lives of faith. As we tell the Christmas story, perhaps new Christmas stories—stories of new life and

new light occur and get told. Our prayer invites that new light that has dawned on us to be kindled and to shine forth in our lives.

As each of us is enlightened, so let each live enlightened lives. In my experience, that move from *seeing* light to *being* light always requires a little kindling. I may see something new, I may have my mind expanded or enlightened, I may experience awe, but then there is being the vision, being the new mind, expressing the awesome. For, you see, it is one thing for me to believe something; it's quite another for me to live my belief in a way that you see and experience it such that it brings you light, so that light passes between and among us all. Bringing new light to life is more than a "matches and newspaper" affair.

Kindling the new light—giving it energy, means beating back the darkness and being transformed by light. I may be inspired by the new vision, but am I willing to let go of the old patterns—the former attachments, so near to my nature?

This Christmas, my family gathered from several parts of the country. If you ever want to look for the old patterns and the former attachments so near to your nature, just get together with your family. Over the hours of that visit, I tried both to engage *and* to step back and be aware. Where would the old arguments arise? When would those feelings come? How do new additions to the family change the dynamic and where do the patterns still have their tenacious hold?

I can report that many of the old patterns are alive and well. Some of them I felt intensely, others have softened some. The light that I must continue to kindle and live is my awareness that I am not the patterns nor am I bound by them. In fact, their hold on me has always really been my hold on them.

Isn't that the way with many things? That which we hold onto with such security and certitude shapes our lives—shapes what we see, what we know, what we believe to be true. So be careful what you grasp hold of.

The light, wisdom, and love of God that was from the beginning with God, entered human flesh at Christmas. That light, wisdom, and love was kindled in the heart of Jesus so much so that it shined forth in his life. Attached only to that light, wisdom and love, he walked freely, feeling the world's pain, but not becoming the pain; suffering, but stopping the suffering with his compassion; seeing life's beauty and joy and celebrating. He embraced and blessed, but never grasped hold. Jesus was able to walk free, and show how it is done to you and to me.

Light enkindled in his hearts, shining forth in his life.

I would like to close with another collect:

Holy Wisdom,  
"lighten up," your graced voice urges,  
as I dig my way deeper  
into the paralysis of anxiety.

Immersed in my intensity,  
bludgeoned with responsibility,  
I focus on the thousand items  
shouting at me from their precarious perch  
while I wheeze with self-pity.

"Lighten up,"



your graced voice suggests  
as I struggle in the net  
of my desolate self-destruction.

Inundated with details and duties,  
each clamoring for a morsel of my time,  
my life is overpopulated with expectations  
while my true loves are ignored and unfed.

When did I develop the notion  
That I could do it all?  
When did I smugly decide I could handle everything  
without you by my side?

Slowly I become more grateful  
for your strong, persistent voice  
nudging me toward the laughter of letting go  
and the chuckle of neglect.<sup>1</sup>

May the new light of laughter and letting go be kindled to lighten your load and light up your life. May that shine through me ... through you.

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<sup>1</sup> "Lighten Up" *Prayers to Sophia*, Joyce Rupp