

The Church of Horse Gulch

BY JAMES D. SANDERSON

Eleven years ago my wife Nancy and I decided to find out about the real spiritual needs in our community, so we began visiting our homeless shelter, the soup kitchen and twelve-step recovery meetings. We had participated in many short term mission trips overseas but a friend had challenged us by asking, “Who is doing anything in our own community?” We were determined to find out.

As I entered the back door of the soup kitchen for the first time, I noticed a fifty-year old woman who was obviously homeless. She lived, I was to discover, in a cave up in the rocks in Horse Gulch, here in Colorado. Her brown coat was mottled with wet splotches and her wool hat was pulled down low over her forehead. She was laughing loudly and telling her friends, “My pets hate this cold weather. They don’t like to come out when it’s this cold.” Then she

pulled some rocks out of her pocket. It was hard to tell if she was joking. She had a muted, taciturn sense of humor. “Rocks are living

conversation over a plate of hot stew. Between bites I asked, naively, “What’s it like living out like that all the time?” It was February. I

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Again she gave that wide wink and laughed, but I felt her challenge was no joke.

creatures,” she said. “They just move really slow.” She dragged the word *slow* way out, and then winked and laughed.

Before long I was able to engage Donna in some

couldn’t quite comprehend how people survived days and nights of temperatures that hovered around ten degrees.

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out, why don't you come and try it for yourself?" Again she gave that wide wink and laughed, but I felt her challenge was no joke. In fact, the way those words struck me, they might have been spoken by Jesus himself. The Holy Spirit convicted me. I would go out and try it for myself.

Moving to Another "Neighborhood"

The following week, I took a sleeping bag and a roll of plastic and followed Donna and several others up into the mountains, to their home in Horse Gulch. The temperature was about twenty degrees and storm clouds were threatening snow. We built a small fire with twigs, which only provided meager warmth in that cold. We had been given sandwiches at the soup kitchen that we ate for supper. The cheese was cold and seemed to clot in my mouth. It sat like lead in my stomach the rest of the night.

Dark came early that time of year, so I wasn't really tired when everyone else went off to their

camp to settle in to sleep. I was alone with the snow coming in and the wind moaning down through the gulch. Somewhere off to my left, tree limbs were slashing together in the darkness and dry leaves were rattling. I eased down into my sleeping bag and pulled the plastic over the top. People had frozen to death out in these mountains, I recalled.

Had I made a terrible blunder? Would I survive the night?

At the first promise of light in the morning I was up, pulling on my stiff boots and stomping around like a strange beast, trying to get warm. Before long we all headed together back down to the soup kitchen and warmth.

That was my first night sleeping out. But it would not be

my last. "We've never had a Christian come out to stay with us before," Donna said.

"Do you think it would be all right if we started coming up on Sundays for worship? We could bring some sandwiches and juice," I asked.

"I'd love that," she said. "It gets so lonely out there. I'm sure the others would too." So the die was cast: the gulch was to become our church and the homeless our congregation.

A Non-traditional Church

Faithfully, Sunday after Sunday, we made our way up into Horse Gulch bearing our *church-in-the-box* as we called it then. Donna and the others were always happy to see us—for a break in their routine if for no other reason. Summer came and went.

We battled gnats that summer—*no-see-ums*—so called because you don't see them until after they have left a nasty welt along your hair-line, behind your ears or on your arms.

How did Nancy and I find ourselves out here leading a worship service in the middle of nowhere? We had both grown up in "good" churches. She in a church that considered itself doctrinally pure, which means it had one doctrine laid over another so thick that it was coated in rules; and I in a denominational church that was so watery that one was fortunate to hear Jesus spoken of at all. For

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twenty years in our adult life we had been committed to another church here in Colorado. Nancy played her flute on the praise team and I took turns with others leading a contemporary worship service that the senior pastor would have nothing to do with.

As we started to reach out to the poor, the lost, the homeless and the downtrodden, however, we found ourselves less and less welcome in our “traditional” church. We began to learn more and more that the Church—that is, the body of Christ—is found through grace, not through works or through rituals or rules. We introduced three reasons why we come together every Sunday, which include the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. “We have three reasons for gathering together,” we say: “To love God, love our neighbors and to make Christian disciples.” Our statement of faith: “Jesus is Christ.” How simple! And yet how difficult others have tried to make it.

We skipped Sundays at our “traditional” church and no one seemed to notice. In truth, they were probably happy to see us gone. We were too liberated to fit into their scheme of worship any longer. After a time we simply stopped attending. This was our church now.

Thanksgiving at Horse Gulch

The second winter of our ministry began in October. By November the snow was already getting deep. For some reason, Donna declined our invitation to join us for a Thanksgiving community dinner that is held at the fairgrounds every year. Nancy, being every bit as stubborn as Donna, would not hear of her doing without a meal while everyone else was feasting. She made up a plate and covered it with foil and headed up to the gulch. It was dark by then—the falling-back time change having already gone into effect. There was a sliver of a moon and everything had a bright, eerie look about it, and all the recessed areas were

shrouded in shadow. Along the road some scrubby bushes seemed they might harbor all manner of wild threats.

When we reached the bend in the road above where she lived in her shelf cave, we called out, “Hey,

Over the summer we had set up a tent as part of a permanent camp and “mission” among the homeless there. On this Friday night we once again decided to make good on our commitment to “come and try it for yourself.” After Donna



**How do people survive this loneliness?
Never mind the cold and the snow and
the darkness. No, I believe you could die
quite easily from being so alone.**

Donna. We brought you supper.”

“What?” she called down in genuine surprise. “Who is it?” Her voice turned to suspicion. In the past people had gone up the hill to harass her. She has been known to throw rocks down on their heads.

“It’s me—Nancy. I’m bringing Thanksgiving up to you.”

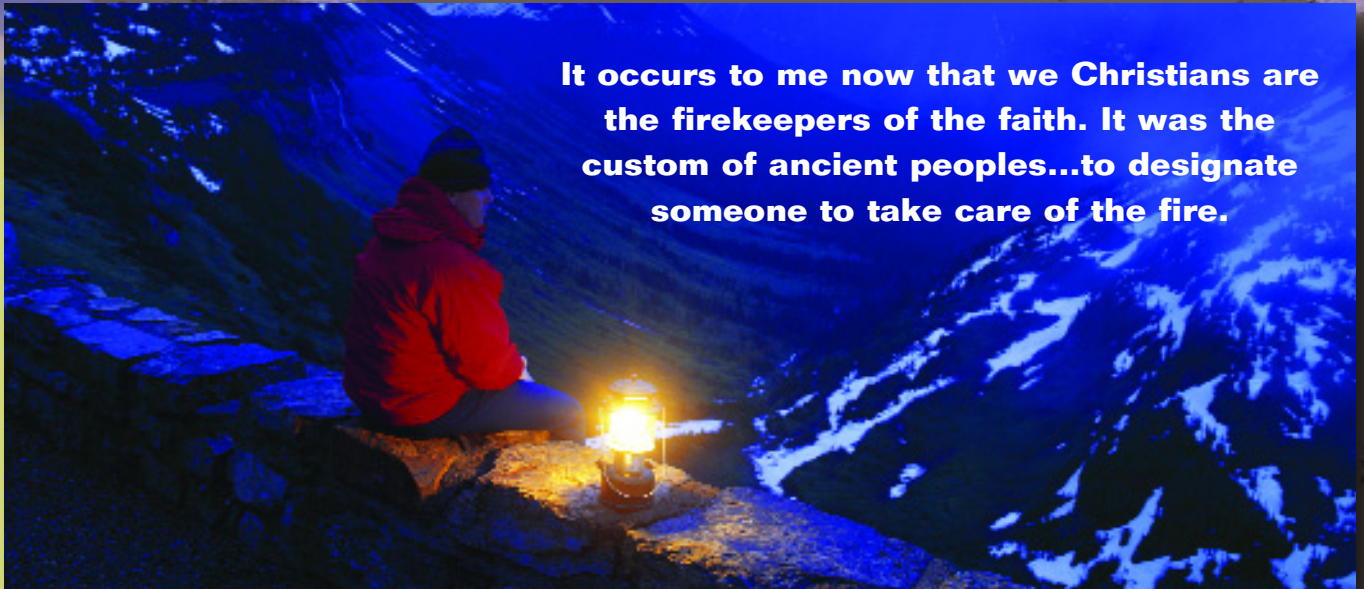
“You didn’t have to do that,” Donna said. Nancy grabbed the flashlight and headed up the rough scramble slope, slipping but catching herself several times before she reached the dark opening. “Goodness. I’m surprised to see you here.”

“If you won’t join us for a meal, we have to bring the meal to you,” Nancy replied.

Living As Others Live

It was that winter, too, that Nancy and I slept out in Horse Gulch.

and the others went to bed, Nancy and I sat in our tent for a time. It was too cold to sleep—the temperature was hovering around zero degrees—so we went for a walk instead. That turned out to be not much better because the wind started blowing, sucking the heat out of our bodies as fast as we could produce it. Some nights it just doesn’t matter how you dress, you are going to be cold. At this time of night, perhaps ten o’clock, there was no one about. We started out by checking the doors of churches to see if any one of them might have left a way open to share a little of their warmth. All were locked up tight. One door at the First Presbyterian Church entered onto a narrow enclosure that would have provided some protection from the wind, but God alone



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only knows how long we could hide in there before the police would come by to roust us.

This was a strange game we were playing. The trees were all dark and their upper branches were waving mutely in the wind. The sidewalks were cold and in spite of the fact that we kept walking at a brisk pace, our feet absorbed the cold. And there was something so sad about being out there that night.

It was a game, yes, and we knew we could end it anytime we wanted by heading for our warm home and comfy beds.

But, being out there now, we looked up into the lit windows of all those other people's houses and we felt totally alone. A helpless sense of complete alienation crept into our bones along with the cold and even now we sometimes sob to think about it.

What if we had no home to go to? What would that be like? What if this was your life? What if it was going to be the same tomorrow night, and the night after that? How do people survive this loneliness?

Never mind the cold and the snow and the darkness. No, I be-

lieve you could die quite easily from being so alone.

Firekeepers of the Faith

At last we made our way back up the hill to our tent. We slept fitfully. It was so cold that even though we had warm sleeping bags and our stocking caps were pulled down over our ears, there was simply no way to stay warm. About four in the morning we switched on the flashlight and saw frost crystals shining all over the inside of the nylon. Our breath—our exhalations—had apparently frozen solid. We gave up on sleep and headed back down to our car. We caught several hours of good sleep at home before the day finally began. Others, however, are not so fortunate.

It occurs to me now that we Christians are the firekeepers of the faith. It was the custom of ancient peoples, as I understand it, to designate someone to take care of the fire during ceremonial vision quests and sweat lodges and during communal dances. This person, too, was charged with preserving the tribe's ability to create fire when they moved from one location to another.

This firekeeper would go to extraordinary lengths to insure a coal was kept alive until they could establish a new fire at their next camp. The importance of fire could not be overstated. It was warmth, light, hot food and water, protection and even, by way of its smoke, a deterrent for insects. A good campfire, then and now, is the central gathering place for people in the wilds. Fire was sacred, and it could not be allowed to be extinguished.

In the same way Christ has made each of us a firekeeper. We have been given an ember from the fire of Christ's revolution. By yielding to Christ, so that the risen Lord may live his life in us, we participate in the fire of God's presence. He enables us to maintain the coals of his fire. What great freedom and what great opportunity we have been given! □

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