

## ADVENT 2, Dec. 4, 2016, Year C

"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (Matthew 3:11b-12)

- Over Thanksgiving, Martha and I were down on the Alabama Gulf Coast with our Louisiana family. It was a *re-scheduled* trip because we had planned to be on the beach with them in August. But then, the great flood struck Baton Rouge. My oldest son told me that it really *had not rained* since, and the whole region was experiencing a drought. This is surely the reason why communities around Great Smokey Mountain National Park were recently threatened by wildfire. Between *these two kinds of natural disaster*, extensive *flooding* caused by heavy rain, *and* sweeping *wildfires*, surely the *latter* are more frightening. People die in *both*. But, *if I had to choose* between them, I would choose *floods*. For with heavy rains and flooding, I think I would have a better chance to take precaution or find a possible means of escape. And from what I have heard and read, getting onto a rooftop while surrounded by raging fire would provide *little hope* for protection.
- Of course, we rarely *get to choose* our disasters! But another dimension of this *hypothetical* choice between flooding and wildfire has to do with *what is lost*. As we have seen in Louisiana, flooding causes immense destruction, especially to personal belongings that are *below* the flood level. Yet, pictures and memorabilia that are hung on the walls or on top of furniture often survive even waist-high water. *After a flood*, carpets and floorboards need to be removed, along with soaked couches. And the sheetrock needs to be cut away to about 6 inches above the flood line. (*All this refuse gets set out on the street.*) Yet, *the wall studs, ceiling and exterior siding, as well as much of the plumbing can be re-used. But when a wildfire consumes a house, usually nothing is left*, except perhaps a stone chimney and concrete foundations. The house and its contents are a *total loss*.
- Either way, whether through flooding or wildfire, what is lost in the disaster are things of value to those who live or vacation there. *Challenging experiences like this cause us to reflect on what is of greatest value.* I saw a video of a burly

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man standing in his recently flooded home in Baton Rouge. He was weeping while sifting through things like ruined family pictures. And yet, he had to admit that *all this was nothing* compared to having his family survive the ordeal.

- Experiences like this help us appreciate Jesus' words. As *The Message* translation puts them: "Don't hoard treasure down here where it gets eaten by moths and corroded by rust or—worse!—stolen by burglars. Stockpile treasure in heaven... *It's obvious, isn't it?* The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being."<sup>1</sup> *And so, where do we most want to be?*
- A few Sundays ago, I said this: "*We always live toward our end*" ~ *either* toward our End in the sense of our fulfillment and the realization of our potential, or our end in the sense of our dissolution and demise. Today, in light of our Gospel reading, we can revise that phrase in a slightly different way: *we always live toward burning fire* ~ *either* in the sense that we will become *alive* through the fire of God's Holy Spirit, *or*, we live toward the burning fire that will consume, and *reduce to ash*, all that is not godly within us.
- These are the two kinds of fire that we experience spiritually: the fire that burns up dross within us, and the fire that purifies and enlivens our God-mirroring human spirit. But we often experience them *in tandem*. It isn't the case, I think, that we somehow choose, or end up by default experiencing, just one or the other. At least in theory, *we all* want to experience the enlivening fire of the Holy Spirit. Yet, obstacles to that desired result exist within us, obstacles that we have either set up or which we have tolerated, and left in place. These obstacles have various forms ~ they can be our attachment to objects upon which we depend for security, comfort or self-image; they can be habits to which we are captive instead of patterns for living which we proactively choose; and, we simply give in to laziness or, worse, to a lethargic distrust of spiritual transformation that could actually improve us. *I have struggled with all three.*
- When we are comfortable with these obstacles, we're likely to experience the fiery presence of God's Holy Spirit as a consuming fire, as something like the

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raging wildfires that have recently threatened homes and businesses in places like Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge. *Punt bluntly*, we can cling to our sins of omission and commission because we are wary of spiritual growth. To adapt a familiar saying, we think the angel of darkness *that we know* is preferable to the uncertain character of the alternative. Or, *to put it figuratively*, I may *with all my might fight* the fire that could consume the shack in which I live, fearing I might have no better place in which to dwell. *And yet*, I need to be willing to let the dross within me be burnt up to ashes, in order to experience the flames of purity and beauty that bring me new life.

- Consider John the Baptizer's words in our Gospel, and how he speaks of *both* kinds of fire, and both kinds of burning, with the same breath: "[I baptize you with water for repentance](#), but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. [He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire](#). His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; [but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire](#)."<sup>2</sup> The One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, is *also* the one who will burn chaff with *unquenchable* fire.
- I began by contrasting the destroying effects of floods with the consuming effects of fires. I suggested how the former *might* be preferable to the latter because fire can be a *more threatening* disaster. Something of this contrast is present in John the Baptizer's words, in our Gospel. And yet, [both Scripture and our Baptismal liturgy draw a correlation between the two](#). John led people into the cleansing waters of Baptism instead of advising them *simply to wait* for the Coming One's Baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire. We go through the waters of death into a fiery new Covenant life with God. [We follow Israel's journey through the Red Sea and the people's encounter with God's fiery presence on Mt. Sinai](#). And we find it in our own lives, as we live into and through our Baptism into our new Covenant life with God.
- This is worth remembering: According to a NASA physicist, "[Fire is the mechanism by which the forest is continually regenerated](#)." "[Fire consumes](#)

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dead, decaying vegetation... thereby clearing the way for new growth. Some species, such as the jack pine, even rely on fire to spread their seeds." By melting the resin in their cones, fire causes them to pop open, and release seeds for new trees.<sup>3</sup>

- This season of Advent provides us with a time of *new beginnings* ~ new beginnings in our own lives, and in the life of our parish. We should *not* be surprised if, in either, we experience the burning of what is dead and dying, even if it's uncomfortable. *Neither* should be surprised by momentary, and even *enduring*, experiences of enlivening fire, through God's Holy Spirit. In the process, *we want to keep our focus! We want to keep our focus not on what we have lost, but on what we gain.*

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:19-21, in *The Message* translation (emph. added).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 3:11-12.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from the article, "Evolving in the Presence of Fire," by David Herring, from the NASA Earth Observatory website: <<http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Features/BOREASFire/>> accessed on 2Dec16.

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