

ADVENT SUNDAY II “A”
DECEMBER 7/8, 2019

The vision from the proverbial, or perhaps real, 30,000 foot height of a formerly lush green landscape populated with trees which has fallen victim to a wildfire at first glance can be devastating and depressing. But a closer examination some months afterward will reveal something amazing, from this scorched seemingly dead landscape, small green shoots of new forest growth are emerging from the ash. Out of death; new life.

This experience which we have witnessed in the western states of our country following the recent wildfires the past couple of years is similar to the experience out of which the prophet Isaiah proclaims his message in our first reading with its familiar images of peace—lion and lamb resting together; the emergence of a righteous ruler who brings justice and peace; a ruler endowed with what we name as the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit into which we are sealed through the Sacrament of Confirmation. Isaiah lived at the time of Israel’s destruction and exile to Babylon, and in the midst of his day, like ours marked by violence and injustices of various sorts, the prophet foresees a day of redemption, restoration; the old order destroyed, a new order established. His vision stands at the heart of the Advent and Christmas celebrations. All of us, too, personally and collectively, long for peace, justice, mercy, healing, forgiveness, mercy, redemption.

Forestry management workers point out, that apart from fires caused by arson or by means such as electrical transmission wires coming into contact with dry vegetation, (as was the case in California) naturally occurring fires, (caused by lightening) or controlled burns by forest management personnel, are ways of renewing a forest. In the life of a forest dense undergrowth can choke off needed nutrients to the trees. Fire cleanses the forest of this clutter and strengthens the trees left to be more disease resistant and to renewed growth while at the same time allowing new tree growth to emerge. This phenomenon, I’d suggest, is a lens for us to look through as we again confront, or better are confronted, with John the Baptist today.

Some years ago, in a previous parish, one of my parishioners said to me, “Father, you need to give one of those “hellfire and brimstone” sermons on the Ten Commandments because I

know some people here who need to hear one.” Turning to him, I said, “And what about you?”
And what about us?

Like a forest, while to a 30,000 foot overview our lives can lush and healthy, it too can become choked with undergrowth. Like the natural kind, this undergrowth can rob our lives of the light and vision of God; of the nourishment of his grace through prayer and the sacraments. John the Baptist comes to us today with the fire of God—*What fruit am I bearing? Where are my sagging branches heavy with the fruits of righteousness and compassion? Where in the debates that consume our national and church life have I shown myself to be on the side of God, of the Gospel? Am I an agent of peace or one of division? Do I stand on the side of the oppressed and impoverished? Have I, am I, shown that the poor in body and spirit are the ones who are truly blessed? The stones lying at my feet...could they be shown to be more faithful than I?* Fiery questions, to be sure, but necessary if the new, or renewed, life Jesus comes to bestow on us at Christmas is to sprout and we are to be revealed as children of the Kingdom of peace and justice begun in Jesus is to emerge, be strengthened and continue to grow in the world through us.

In the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation, God comes with the healing fire of the Spirit to burn away all that hinders his life on the soil of our soul and call forth new life. This Sunday afternoon here at St. Cecilia and next Sunday afternoon at St. Thomas Aquinas, we will gather as a community and open ourselves to God’s loving, purifying, renewing fire of forgiveness and mercy through the Sacrament of Penance. Don’t let the undergrowth of years away from this sacrament keep you away. How long it has been since your last Confession is not the issue—the issue is: God in his mercy desire to cleanse you, fill you with peace and bring new growth in holiness in you.

“Come Holy Spirit, kindle in us the fire of your love and renew the face of the earth.”