

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent  
Dec. 4 & 5, 2016

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When I was leading a group of pilgrims this past October we had a bit of excitement when we were in Rome and Assisi. You might say, unsettling excitement because on three separate occasions we felt the tremors of the earthquakes which were about 60 miles away from us when we were in Assisi. It was quite alarming for those who had never felt anything like that.

What John the Baptizer was doing was also quite jarring, very earthquake like for his family and time. John's father, Zachariah was a high priest and both his mother and father were followers of the law. Mind you, there were 627 of them at the time. Here is their son, dressed in what the Prophet Elijah's outfit was and eating what he could get from nature. This bridge builder between the Old and New Testament was not following any of the Jewish dietary codes, not preaching in the temple or synagogue, in fact, he was not part of any institutional religion. He could be reached by anyone, and indeed, the "anyone's" came! They came great distances from Galilee and Jerusalem. To them all, he said, "Turn your life around. Make up your mind to do what is right and repent of what you did wrong." The great scandal is that John made God too accessible! He was down there by the Jordan, could have been the Rio Grande, telling all those outsiders, a panorama of people, that God is at hand. They don't have to do something first, like follow all the laws, tithe, bow to the Pharisees and Levites. His message was that God already loves you before you do anything. When a person experiences love and mercy, then they do good things. God's message was never about, do good things, and then I will love you and be merciful to you.

So into that water come the tax collectors, the beggars, the mercenaries, the prostitutes. They were ready to turn their lives around because they heard the message of love and mercy, forgiveness and faithfulness... ready to be noticed and embraced.

Jesus must have heard about this great preacher and baptizer and walked 4 days journey to where John was at the river. John shakes up the day again by pointing out that someone is coming whose sandal he isn't even worthy to touch. He is only baptizing people to open them up to a new life and here comes the new life bringer. Jesus is mentored by John into the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus stays with John for a while and who does he see believing in this Good News of being loved? All the people who thought they were unworthy of love. Jesus saw how open and vulnerable they were who came into the water. Yes, God can work with that vulnerability. So Jesus goes a bit further up the river and does the same, starts baptizing all who were ready for a new life, a new start, a hope they could hang on to.

John explained that he baptized with water. Jesus baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Remember when Fr. Greg Boyle came last year to present to us some of the stories he wrote about in his book, *Tattoos of the Heart*? He said that he was moved by an experience he had when he was young. His mother told him and his brother that they were not to go to the attic and take things out of there. Well, anyone knows that's an open invitation laced with excitement. When they got up there they found a record their mother had produced, for she had an excellent voice. They took it down, played the record, and heard their mother sing "O Holy Night." We know the words: "O Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining, it is the night of our dear savior's birth. Long lay the world in sin and error pinning, 'til he appeared and the soul found its worth." Got that? The Soul found its worth. Jesus came to tell every soul of its worth. And those who believe that the Spirit of God is upon them also have the fire that Jesus brought. Fire to bring that message: **every soul has great worth**. Father Greg had fire for all those young gang members who thought their lives were disposable. The four martyrs of El Salvador worked and laid down their lives for the *compesinos* because they were on fire. Those who march to make injustice know are on fire. The woman who reaches out to every person she knows who is lost in grief or burdened with sickness is on fire. The

person whose mantra is always “how can I help you?” and who follows through, is on fire.

The person who wrote today’s reading from Isaiah, illustrating the peaceable kingdom, the lion lying down with the lamb. This is the fire of a vision of a time when no one would live in fear, when peace replaced hostility, when trust drives out anxiety and hope displaces despair. In these weeks before Advent we sing, “Come Lord Jesus.” Yes, Come Lord; come so that we aren’t just baptized in water but that we embrace the fact that we have been baptized with Your Spirit. Let us, like John, announce with our lives that you have come. Let us make it clear in the way we love one another. Let us welcome you in the other. Amen