Spirituality
Pencil Preaching



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“I am baptizing with water … but the one who is to come will baptize you with Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matt 3:10).

Is 11:1-10; Ps 72; Rom 15:4-9; Matt 3:1-12

Second Sunday of Advent

In days past, preachers who went around giving parish missions quickly learned that the most attended night was the sermon about “other people’s sins.” Good Catholics took great satisfaction in hearing in great detail about what other people were doing and what punishments they should expect. In the scholastic manuals for confessors there was even a category of sin for overdoing this interest. “Morose delectation” was taking pleasure at the thought of someone else getting what they deserved.

The God who kept score was the God preached by John the Baptist. His message on the banks of the Jordan River was that judgment was coming. An axe was ready to strike the root of every tree that had not borne fruit. A winnowing fan was about to separate the wheat from the chaff on the threshing floor. His baptism was a baptism of repentance, and people flocked to John to escape the coming wrath of God. The long-suffering virtuous were eager to see divine vengeance come at last.

How confusing then for John to realize that Jesus was not about vengeance but about mercy. The dispensation of strict justice was being surpassed by another dispensation of grace. Anyone who heard Jesus preach was astonished to hear him welcome sinners through the open gates of God’s unconditional love and forgiveness. Tax collectors and prostitutes were taking them by storm. The baptism of the Holy Spirit and of fire was not to purge the guilty but to transform them with love.

Advent challenges us to examine our own justice with one another. How many lives are paralyzed by unresolved hurts and bitter resentments over past insults, family feuds, broken trust? How many lifelines are knotted and blocked for lack of forgiveness, the refusal to be the first to seek reconciliation? Who goes free when victim and perpetrator settle? Both do. Who benefits from letting go and moving on? Everyone does.

The pilgrimage to Christmas is for those willing to shed their baggage and to travel light into the covenant of mercy. Everyone is off the hook. All are welcome. The only people left behind will be those still trying to sort out the unworthy from the worthy, the bad from the good, them from us.

The time is short. May God’s overwhelming love sweep out the scorekeeping and petty resentments that keep us from entering the reign of forgiveness and freedom. This the joy of the Gospel and the real gift of Christmas.