

This year the part of the country I come from has experienced an incredible heat and drought situation, like nothing seen in my memory or recorded weather records as far as I know. When we visited my parents' home in upper east Tennessee in early September, a place known for its greenness—and high humidity—the grass was crispy under my feet, the air was dry and hot and they had already passed a record number of days above 90 degrees and without rain. This, in a place that was one year so humid that the shoes in my closet mildewed. (we didn't have central air in those days.)

In fact, the whole southeast from eastern KY and TN to western NC and southwest VA, as well as northern SC and GA have seen extreme drought conditions this whole year. One of the results of hot dry weather in a wooded region is forest fires. We in the east have often watched from afar as western fires claimed homes and businesses—not to mention wooded areas. But even though sometimes we had our own small fires, we had not in my neck of the woods experienced the kinds of out-of-control fires that those in western states have gone through. Until the last few weeks.

Over the last few weeks reports of fires across the southeast have come—some the usual small fires, some large enough to force evacuations. A former congregant of mine came close to losing her home on Chilhowie Mountain, and Walland Elementary School-- not too far from where we stayed in October—had to be evacuated because of a fire behind the school.

Then this week a major fire erupted, exacerbated by high winds in front of a cold front. If you've been in the GSM national park you might be familiar with the terrain, a series of high mountain peaks and deep valleys. At a peak called "Chimney Top" a fire blew up, and urged on by the winds jumped to other peaks nearby. Pretty quickly it moved north toward the tourist town of Gatlinburg, which again you all may have been to or at least know of. Jeff and I have spent quite a bit of time in the Smokey's and in Gatlinburg and so to see fire all around this place and hear that buildings and roads and trails we had been too was very hard to hear and watch from afar. In the end, it wasn't as bad as it could have been, but it was bad enough: 14000 acres burned, over 100 homes and about 15 businesses lost, and 13 deaths. Chaos for those who were evacuated, whether they were permanent residents or visitors on vacation; chaos for animals displaced by the flames. Chaos for one of the treasures of our country, one of the great representations of God's creation.

Fire can be a scary thing. It can be a comfort, too—a source of light and warmth, a way to cook food, something to gather around. But it can be scary. When I was a kid a fire insurance salesman came to our house and showed us a film about what happens when your house catches fire. Needless to say, for years I would wake up expecting our house to be in flames. (it probably didn't help that one Christmas morning my dad *did* wake up to find the thermostat in the living room just on the brink of bursting into flames.) Jesus uses images of a "fiery pit" that his opponents will be thrown into and preachers have used this forever as the image of hell that awaits those who don't believe in Jesus as the only way. Even John, in our gospel passage today, speaks of the one who will come after him, who will baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit.

In Advent we don't necessarily expect to be talking about baptism by fire. In modern lingo this means being thrown into a stressful situation with no experience to fall back on. But John is speaking of something else: a fire that refines, that cleanses, that burns away the debris that have been separated from the wheat seed. John's baptism in water cleanses us but the baptism by fire burns, removing the crusty hard bits of our hearts. It is the refiner's fire that is talked about in Micah; it is the tongues of flame that perched on the disciples' heads at Pentecost.

If we went to the Smokeys today, it would be rough. There would be places where the underbrush, young trees, plants and bushes were completely burned away, where whatever trees are still standing are blackened and scarred. Where once was lush greenness would be desolation, houses burned to the ground. But we've also seen this happen before, in other forests, in other parts of the country and we know what happens. We know that what we're left with, then, is something like is described in the Isaiah passage: new growth. The new growth will be tender and gentle; the forest will regenerate and the houses will be rebuilt. Not the same, of course, and not without some pain, but it will happen.

Isaiah predicts this will happen for the people of Israel and for us as well. A new king will come, but not a king as we know kings; a servant king inhabited by the spirit of the Lord. This will be the new growth, the new thing that God will do after the refiners fire. A righteous king who will usher in a reign of peace that the world has never known, a peace that is from God. As we saw last week all people will stream to this king and the kingdom will be of heaven and earth.

The thing is, even though we believe that this kingdom is at hand, as John and Jesus both proclaimed, we know it hasn't come to completion yet. And even though a king is coming, has come from the stump of Jesse, we too are part of the new growth—growth that happens within us and because of us. Renewal of God's creation.

We are part of the renewal of God's creation when we work for justice by supporting those who are fighting for justice. When we go to rallies, when we make signs, when we give to causes. We are part of the renewal of God's creation when we feed the poor at Cornerstone, or by giving to Be Concerned. We are part of the renewal of God's creation when we work for peace by protesting war, by working against the industrialization of the prison system, by seeking an end to gun violence in our communities. We are part of the renewal of God's creation when we are friends to the friendless, when we love one another as Jesus loved his disciples, as God loves us. The baptism of fire leads to a renewal of creation, a peaceful kingdom in which all are welcome, all are equal, all belong. A peaceful kingdom that is by no means weak but powerful, strong because of the purity of spirit that has come from being refined, powerful because it is built on the interconnectedness of us all.

We don't really know what John expected from one who would baptize with fire and the Spirit. What we do know is that if we live by the principles of Jesus, if we love one another, serve one another, confess to one another we can bring our world closer to the ideal, good creation God envisioned from the beginning. We also know that following the principles of Jesus in a real way, giving ourselves to it and turning away from what the world tells us is right, is hard, and might be painful as the hard parts of ourselves are burned away. What will be left, however, will be the seeds of the peaceable kingdom envisioned by God. Amen.