

One might think that the change of seasons doesn't come around for another 3 weeks yet, with the first day of summer beginning at precisely at 2:44 p.m. on Saturday, June 20. But another even more important seasonal change in this part of the world is already upon us. A number of news stories the past few weeks remind us that CalFire tells us that the 2020 fire season is already upon us.

I have had several occasions in my life – sometimes for a few hours at a time, and sometimes for a few days at a time – to find myself in the midst of a forest fire. Back in the late 1980's and early 90's, while I was a priest in the northwest corner of Montana, I did what most everybody in that part of the world did to get by. I “diversified.” That is to say, nobody there does just “one thing” for a living. Everybody cobbles together several different part-time jobs – some of which probably pay, and some of which probably don't – just to make ends meet and to keep life interesting. Come to think of it, I guess it's what I still do even to this day.

Well, one of the things I did back in those days, in addition to being a priest, along with Sylvia, at two very small congregations, was that I was an E.M.T. – I was an ambulance driver. And being that the town we lived in was smack-dab in the middle of the Kootenai National Forest, we usually had more than our fair share of forest fires. The Forest Service would contract with the small volunteer ambulance service of which I was a member to provide medical care in the fire camps for the crews who were working the fire lines. Fire camps are a totally self-contained community unto themselves; with a command center, food services, entertainment, a little bit of shopping, and an incredibly well-equipped medical unit – all amid a sea of

tents and tarps and bedrolls. Working a fire was a way to pick up a little extra income, and besides, it was also a way to hang out with some incredibly fascinating people. Forest firefighters (as some of you perhaps may know) really are a breed unto themselves.

Living in Altadena, along the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains, when the Santa Ana winds kick up, and the plumes of smoke pop up somewhere in the Angeles National Forest every year, we understand the awesome power and destructiveness and sheer terror which can accompany a wildfire, when the winds howl and the fire bursts forth from every direction. If you have ever met a large-scale forest fire up close and personal, you will know that it is both a terrifying and a mesmerizing experience. To witness nature's power in all her fury is both humbling and exhilarating. The sights, the smells, and sometimes even the sounds of trees exploding from the heat a mile or more away... all those sensory experiences will stay with me, probably for the rest of my life.

A few years ago, Sylvia gave me a book entitled *The Smoke Jumper*, by Nicholas Evans – the British author whose most well-known title is *The Horse Whisperer*. In *The Smoke Jumper*, Evans offers the most vivid description of the inception of a forest fire that I've ever read. Please allow me to share it with you.

Up the mountain and over the ridge, little more than a mile from where the group was camped, the lightning of the previous night had nestled all this time in the old lodgepole's desiccated heart, a cocoon of dull heat that neither glowed nor any longer smoked. And had the wind not risen that night and funneled upward through the pine's riven stem, along crevices carved in it by ants and mites, then this pupa of fire might well have died. Fanned by the

breeze, however, it fed on fragments of resinous wood until it glowed and grew and glowed yet brighter. And at last, in the witching of the night, it hatched.

The grass and scrub around and beneath the old tree were dry and brittle and rustled in the wind and when the stem torched, its entire length was engulfed within seconds and flaming fragments fell upon the grass which torched as well. And as the lodgepole's limbs came asunder, they fell and rolled downhill, laying trails of flame in their wake which spread and joined and spread yet farther until the entire slope was ablaze.

Had none of the rolling limbs of flame reached the forest, the fire might have starved and died, but the largest found a steeper route and crashed and cartwheeled deep among the trees, sending showers of sparks as it went. And so parched was the forest that every spark found an eager host and every host became a fire of its own until all conjoined and roared as if in remonstrance that want of water should have forced them to drink this other fatal element instead.

The Smoke Jumper, p. 112

There's an old church camp song that tells us: "It only takes a spark to get a fire going." Today we celebrate the feast day of Pentecost, the Christian holiday which finds its roots in the Jewish holiday of the same name. For the Jews, Pentecost fell 50 days after Passover (that's what "Pentecost" means – 50th). It was, and is, the day when Jews offer the first fruits of the new harvest, and commemorate that event when God gave Moses the 10 Commandments (if you will remember, on a mountain which was covered with wind and fire). As Christians, we are reminded of that story in the 2nd chapter of the Book of Acts – our first reading this morning – as

Jesus' disciples (faithful Jews that they were) gathered 50 days after Passover, 50 days after Jesus' death and resurrection, gathering with other faithful Jews for the Jewish festival of Pentecost.

And as they gathered that day, there was a wind... a mighty wind. And there were tongues, tongues as of fire. And that fire rested on the disciples, and they were anointed with that fire, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Those winds of change... and those fires of passion... blew through and among that faithful group of men and women... forming them, and informing them, and transforming them from a loose-knit group of believers into a unified, focused, and mission-driven community. And these disciples... who once were nothing but a band of followers of some itinerant preacher now were made new, now were made whole, now were given a new mission in life – and the church was born. Whatever those folks had thought they were beforehand, God had now re-created them into a whole new Body. Whatever work they had once believed might be their divine purpose... they now understood their relationship with God, and their relationship with one another, and the work that God had set before them, in a whole new way.

“It only takes a spark to get a fire going.” Pentecost is about believing that that holy spark which lighted upon the disciples is still present... that it resides within you... that it resides within me... that it resides within each of us and all of us... that it resides within this holy place we call St. Alban's... that it resides everywhere in God's holy creation. And Pentecost is about believing that a single holy spark, when fanned by a single breath of holy wind, can ignite, and take flame, and burn ever-so-brightly... and change the world.

There are people all around us – you know these people – who have yet to experience that glorious flame. And there are people around us who perhaps had that fire burning once in their lives, but now the flame has dimmed, and it’s hard to find the way. And there are people around us whose flames are present, but have yet to be fanned, and so remain little more than a spark. And there are people around us who have some kind of a flame burning within them, but they don’t have the words to describe that experience, and they don’t have the community to nurture and develop that experience, and they feel utterly alone. There are people... we know them... we work with them... we play with them... we live with them... we go to the shopping center, or the golf course, or the dry cleaner, or the theatre, or the grocery store with them... there are people.

“When the day of Pentecost had come, suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.” Pentecost... it’s not about “you.” And it’s not about “me.” And it’s not even about “us.” It’s about the wind... and it’s about the fire. The same winds of change, and the same fires of new life, which blew through the disciples’ gathering on that day of Pentecost so long ago is even now rattling our doors and shaking our windows, and threatening to break into our lives, break into our church, break into our world today. It is the same holy wind which blows out the cobwebs of the past, and brings with it the promise of all things new.

Pentecost... it’s about the world – all of God’s creation. It’s about bringing that holy light of God, that holy fire of God, that holy wind of God out into the world, and then setting it free, and allowing God to do God’s thing, and (as I like to say) sharing with God in the transformation of all creation.

You've heard the stories these past few weeks, lamenting the fact that our churches are closed. You've probably also heard the pushback against those stories, saying that, though our in-person worship might be suspended, the church is anything but closed. That, you see, is the message of Pentecost...that wherever you find yourself... when you bring your own Pentecost wind, and your own Pentecost flame... and then turn it loose... let that wind blow freely, and that flame glow brightly... that God's kingdom might come... God's will might be done... on earth as it is in heaven. That is what it means to be the church. "It only takes a spark to get a fire going." So be that spark in the world today. For the world is waiting... for the wind and for the fire of Pentecost.

Amen.