

Expressions such as “Light a fire under someone” and “Keep someone’s feet to the fire” communicate urgency about accomplishing something.

Fire—really and metaphorically—is filled with contradictions. Fire can destroy; fire can purify. Fire can burn; fire can warm. Fire can blind; fire can light. Fire can consume; fire can melt. Fire is a powerful image. Fire is a strong image that cannot be ignored.

John the Baptist in the Gospel uses this strong image in two ways: as the consequence of condemning judgment and as the source of new Life. John condemns to destructive fire those who do not produce good fruit by the way they live. He also announces that One is coming who will bring a baptism of Spirit and fire. The fire of baptism both burns away the “chaff” in us and ignites our passion for living lives of Christian discipleship and producing its good fruit. Advent is, in the end, about jumping into the fire—a fire that both purifies and enkindles.

The weeks of Advent are given to us as a time to rekindle the urgency about living our baptismal commitment, about following Christ faithfully, about producing good fruit as we open ourselves to deeper encounter and personal relationship with Jesus. I’d like to suggest three concrete ways we can go about keeping the “home fires” of faith burning brightly so that when Jesus comes in our Christmas celebration, as he comes to us in the persons and situations of daily life and ultimately at his final Advent to us at death, he will find us prepared, a ready welcome awaiting.

Today’s Gospel recounts that many people of Judea went out to John and were baptized by him in the Jordan River “as they acknowledged their sins” (Mt. 3:6). The Sacrament of Penance is an invitation to imitate the faith and action of those faithful people in today’s Gospel who journeyed out to John. Advent is an excellent opportunity to check on the “home fires” of faith in our lives. Is it burning brightly or has its brilliance and warmth been reduced to smoldering embers? A sincere celebration of the

Sacrament of Penance, no matter how long it has been, is an opportunity to allow the Spirit of God to re-ignite the glow of divine grace in us.

Last weekend's bulletin and the homily highlighted the importance of prayer in our lives of Advent expectation. Included in the bulletin was an invitation to join fellow parishioners in Eucharistic Adoration. Regular time spent in prayer, especially in the presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, is a way we encounter the "Light shining in the darkness" as well as a way to bank and re-ignite the fire of God's life within us. Consider signing up for an hour of adoration a week today after Mass. If you can't afford an hour, consider stopping by the Burke Chapel on the way to or from work and spend those five minutes I suggested last weekend or a bit longer with Jesus. Like any relationship, the more you give to it, the more it will grow and change you.

Finally, John the Baptist challenged his hearers to live lives that produce "good fruit." Today's first reading from Isaiah contains the list of the traditional "seven gifts of the Holy Spirit." In sharing and living our faith we continue the work of the Kingdom of justice, love and peace begun in Jesus. This weekend is the annual collection to assist religious communities of men and women meet the living needs of retired priests, brothers and sisters who have given a lifetime of service to the church. Many of us here are beneficiaries of their sacrifice. I am one of them. Please be as generous as you can. Taking the time to write, call or email an elected representative on issues of justice in regard to human life and dignity in its many manifestations are another way of bearing fruit the world. Daily acts of kindness and service to members of our family or complete strangers are also ways we acknowledge and serve Jesus in the flesh of our neighbor with the warmth of divine love.

Lord, send forth your Spirit. Kindle in us the fire of your love. And you will renew the face of the earth.