

J.D. Ousley
Homily—16Dec18
“Firepower”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

There’s one image some people get in their minds when they think of the Christian faith. It’s an unfortunate image.

That’s the image of an excited and angry preacher, the preacher who is standing in the pulpit and denouncing sin and warning of the eternal punishment that awaits sinners after they die.

Such preachers may believe that they can find encouragement in the teaching of John the Baptist. As we heard in the Gospel reading today, “John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ... Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’”

On the Baptist’s view, men and women who don’t do good works will be burned up like barren trees. They will feel hellfire and damnation.

Many of us will have trouble sympathizing with the view of God that these preachers project. It’s hard to imagine that God is eager to condemn creatures whom he so lovingly created!

But I do share the Baptist’s frustration with *lukewarm faith*. Many of who are practicing Christians don’t put the effort into our faith that we should. John also says that while he baptizes with water, the Messiah who comes after him will “baptize with the Holy Spirit and with *fire*.”

Here we have a positive image of “fire.” We’ll be baptized with fire! The Messiah will energize us. We will become empowered with the Holy Spirit.

Admittedly, hearing about this kind of faith may make us feel uncomfortable. Think of the secular use of the phrase, “baptism by fire.”

Someone who has to handle a complicated problem on her first day on the job feels the pressure. Yet she still needs to produce.

We could all do with a little fire in our faith. Fortunately, as John the Baptist notes, that fire comes from the Holy Spirit.

As a result, we don’t have to wait to be in a spiritual mood to practice our religion. We don’t need to rely on our personal spiritual firepower. Instead, we can trust in the Spirit of God to give us the help we need.

That spirit will give us not Hell—but help!

Amen.