



Fire, brimstone, and the light of the Lord

After Mass one day a parishioner asked me, "Whatever happened to the old fire and brimstone sermons?" The question caught me a bit off guard and I jokingly responded, "of course we have them, but only seasonally."

Do you remember the old fire -and-brimstone sermons? I remember fondly one of our parish priests when I was growing up; he used to get all worked up in a fury and begin pounding his fist on the pulpit to get his point across when it seemed as if no one was listening to him. Week after week, he would bang his fist as he made the main point of the same sermon, hoping it would eventually pound into our minds, hearts and souls. It never did and eventually he got transferred.

Well, it's not a joke. We still do have the good old fire-and-brimstone homilies, and they are seasonal. Why seasonal? During the Advent season, we hear from one of the original fire-and-brimstone preachers himself — John the Baptist. Over and over again, he kept insisting in a passionate way, "Reform your lives,

the Kingdom of God is at hand." We can only imagine what impact this long-haired preacher out in the middle of the desert had on folks. I am convinced that he grew a bit weary and frustrated in the fact that it seemed no one was listening. So, he heats things up

some good news. I think the reason there is a paucity of fire-and-brimstone preachers is that most of them get burned out because they never delivered the good news. And that is the secret of success of John the Baptist. He presented the challenge and then offered

the Lord's forgiveness and grace. And, then we need to take the next step and embrace the good news: the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Let us not simply stop with the fire and brimstone, but let us embrace the light of Christ into our hearts and lives.

Our first and second readings this weekend give us a wonderful preview of what constitutes the reign of God. The reign of God is the spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and strength, of knowledge and fear of the Lord. The reign of God is the source of all patience and encouragement, a life of perfect harmony with one another according to the spirit of Jesus Christ, the accepting of one another as Christ accepted us, for the glory of God. We need to be reminded that the message of Advent, "reform your lives," is only complete when the second part is proclaimed, "The reign of God is at hand."

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Readings for December 9, the Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-9;
Matthew 3:1-12

and mentions over three times — the unfruitful tree being thrown into the fire, being baptized in the Holy Spirit and fire, and the chaff will be burned in unquenchable fire. That ought to be enough fire to convince us that fire-and-brimstone sermons are still alive and flourishing.

John the Baptist was a wise preacher in the sense he had one main point and emphatically delivered it with passion and energy. And his sermon still has fire. Why? Because John knew how to deal with sinners: get their attention quickly and then deliver

the good news: ultimately the one who follows him, Christ, will help carry out and complete the reformation of life that he has announced.

As each of us makes this annual journey of Advent, it's a time for us to listen to the voice of John the Baptist. His sermon still rings true and should light a fire in our bellies and hearts. All of us need to take some quality time and examine our consciences to admit where we need to be reformed and changed. Advent is a great season to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation and truly feel

[Back to top](#)