

It's 12 days until Christmas. Yet today, we hear John the Baptist. And he's talking tough.

John talks about what the Messiah is coming to do. John says he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. He's got his winnowing fork to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Winnowing is the separation of the kernels of wheat from all of the stuff attached to it. In those days, it had to be done by hand. Farmers would take a winnowing fork or shovel and scoop up the wheat and toss it into the air. The heavy kernels would fall more or less straight down, but the lighter chaff would be blown by the wind to the edge of the threshing floor, where it could be gathered and disposed of by burning.

And John the Baptizer tells us that the Messiah is coming with God's Holy Spirit and Fire. The word Spirit can also be translated as Wind or Breath. God's Holy Wind and Fire are coming to separate the wheat from the chaff, and to dispose of the chaff. "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

It's only 12 days until Christmas. What does this have to do with our late Advent preparations to celebrate Jesus' birth.

Well, I think John is raising an important spiritual question. We need to ask, "Where is the chaff in my life? What in my life is not necessary, what in my life am I stuck to and attached to, though I don't need to be? What things in my life draw me away from God? What things in my life should be cleared away by God's Holy Spirit and Fire."

Fire is not just a force of destruction. It is also a force of cleansing. Needles can be sterilized by fire. The impurities in gold can be removed by fire. Dead brush can be cleared away by grass fires or forest fires, allowing for new growth to occur. Fire can cleanse.

So often, I think, we get caught up in non-essentials. I'm sure you've seen babies or young toddlers at Christmas time who open their Christmas presents. But then, instead of playing with the new toy, they're more interested playing with the ribbons or the wrapping paper or the box. So often, I think, we fall into the same pattern.

We get so caught up with the flash and the glitter of externals, that we forget about the things that matter.

Our society loves to elevate externals. Your value as a human being is determined by your physical appearance, or by the balance in your checking account, or by the number and type of possessions you own. And these messages are seductive. These messages can cause us to become bogged down, to think that the things on the outside that determine your worth.

This time of year, there are 101 different versions of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* floating around the airwaves. One of the most haunting images to me is that of Jacob Marley, draped by heavy chains and locks, wandering around burdened and bogged down.

Sometimes I feel bogged down like that, and perhaps you do to. Will a new car make me happy, or a new computer, or new clothes? Our society says yes, buy, buy, buy, the more you buy, the more valuable you are.

But we need to continually ask, "Are these things what are really important in life? Are these things central to my value as a person and as a child of God? Or am I missing something, like a toddler who is so absorbed in the wrapping paper that she doesn't realize that there's a toy inside?"

Advent is a good time to ask such questions. It is a time in which the Church invites you to look inside yourself in preparation for the celebration of Christmas. It's a good opportunity for you to decide what's important and what's not important in your life. Advent is a time to let go, to let God's Holy Wind blow away the stuff that's not important in your life. It's a time to let God's Holy Fire to bring cleansing into your life. It's a time to be concerned with that which is central, and to let go of that which is peripheral.

Many of you know that I went to seminary in the Chicago area. One of the fringe benefits of going to seminary in Illinois was being only 2.5 hours away from St. Gregory's Abbey, in Michigan. It's a great place for a retreat, out in the middle of nowhere with nothing but farms and woods for miles around.

One rainy morning, a couple of decades ago, finals were over at seminary. And I was at St. Gregory's for a short late Advent retreat just a few days before Christmas. The monks start their day very, very early. So by 6:30 a.m., I had already been to church twice and had had breakfast. The monks were off having their morning period of reading and study. And I was sitting downstairs in the guest house waiting for dawn to come, reading, and listening to a cold rain falling outside.

As I was sitting there, all of a sudden, this woman walked in, wet, muddy, and crying. She said, "Could you please help me?"

What do you say? "Heck, no, I'm on retreat trying to draw closer to God!"

No. I said "Sure. What's wrong?" Turns out she had gotten off the interstate near Kalamazoo, and had really gotten lost on the back roads in the rain. When I say really lost, I mean it. The interstate was a good 40 miles away.

And then, she had run her car off the road. She was able to get the car back on the road, but she couldn't go very far, because she punctured her left front tire. She had pulled into the monastery parking lot, and she had been trying and trying to change the tire. But she couldn't get the hubcap off. I went out with her to her car to see if I could give her a hand.

Her hubcap was an amazing sight. It was one of those old hubcaps that had dozens of wire spokes radiating out from the central hub. And she had used her crow bar, and she had pried and pried and pried at the edges. She had bent and mangled the hubcap. All of the edges were bent up from the force she had applied, but the hubcap would not come off.

I showed her that there was a central cap that you had to remove. And under the cap was a bolt holding the hubcap to the wheel. Once you removed the cap and loosened the bolt, the hubcap came off easily.

But I later thought, "How often am I like that woman?"

How often are you like that woman? Lost, tired, muddy, out in the middle of spiritual nowhere, trying and trying to move things around the edges, instead of at the center. Mangling your edges, when you really need to make a change in your very core.

The Good News that John the Baptizer proclaims is that someone is coming who knows your edges and knows your center. Someone is coming who is more powerful than you are. Someone is coming to baptize with Holy Spirit and Fire, to separate the wheat from the chaff, to separate that which is essential from that which is non-essential in your life. Someone is coming who is willing to take your load upon himself and carry it to the cross on your behalf. And we prepare to celebrate his birth.

Jesus is coming. Let every heart prepare him room.