

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

Thanks to my dad, I have a lifelong fascination with fire. When I was a child, I loved to stand in the yard and watch when a firetruck roared by our house. It was so heavy you could feel it, so loud you couldn't help but hear its sirens blaring, and so fast I wondered if the firemen hanging on to the back of the truck would fall off when the truck hit a bump. Often my dad would take me to watch the firemen put out the fire. I think fire chasing may be illegal, but we always kept a respectable distance, staying out of the way so those brave men could do their work, although I didn't fully appreciate the danger until I became an adult. Nor did I understand that for many of those men—and back then, they were all men—their work was the passion and purpose of their lives.

I don't chase fires any more. And over the years, my childhood fascination with fire has grown into a healthy respect. Fire is certainly one of the most powerful elements of God's creation. When you watch a fire, you see that it seems to be alive—moving, changing colors, intense and threatening in one moment and soft and inviting in the next. It has the ability to consume everything that gets in its way, with no regard for life, and no respect for things that human beings value. But where would our lives be without it? We cook by it; we stay warm because of it. It destroys, but it also creates. It changes matter into energy and energy into matter. Whatever form it takes, it transforms. Nothing, no one who encounters fire is unchanged by it, though we may take that for granted unless it invades our lives in a destructive way.

In today's Gospel, Jesus says, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled." He's not speaking of fire in the literal sense, as I have been speaking, but in the way we often use fire as a descriptor of the feelings and emotions that drive us. Another word for that is passion. Whether it's about love or motivation, our passion defines our lives, tells the story of what is important to us. Whatever we're passionate about is evident to those around us, in what we do and what we say. It brings purpose to our lives. That is certainly the case with Jesus, who at this point in Luke's Gospel is headed for Jerusalem to face a passion of a different kind, the passion that brought an end to his life.

It sounds as if he's frustrated when he says, "Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No!" His purpose has filled him with energy. He knows where he's going and what will happen there. His passion makes him vibrant, active. Though its goal may be peace, his passion itself is not calm and peaceful, and it certainly isn't passive. Like the fire that we sometimes use to describe passion, whatever we are passionate about has the ability to consume us, whether that is for a person, or a cause, or a belief. When our passion becomes the focus of our lives—the thing that gets us out of bed and out of the house in the mornings—we will go to extremes to defend and nurture it. That's what he wants to see in his followers, that energy that is borne from purpose.

Jesus' passion for his own purpose is more than evident in today's Gospel. He wants his listeners—us—to share his passion and purpose; but what we hear is judgment, not invitation. Jesus is ready to get on with what's ahead of him, and impatient with those who don't share his passion. He scolds them. It's almost as if he's saying, "what's wrong with you people? Why don't you get it? He chastises them, calling them hypocrites. Ouch, that hurts! That's the last thing we Christians want to be called. "Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" he says. That question transfers quite easily from Christ's day to our own.

The Rev. John Ortberg told this story in his book, *When the Game is Over, It all Goes Back in the Box*: "A man is being tailgated by a woman in a hurry. He comes to an intersection, and when the light turns yellow, he hits the brakes. The woman behind him goes ballistic. She honks her horn at

him; she yells her frustration in no uncertain terms; she rants and gestures. While she is in mid-rant, someone taps on her window. She looks up and sees a policeman. He invites her to get out of her car and takes her to the station where she is searched and fingerprinted and put in a cell. After a couple of hours, she is released, and the arresting officer returns her personal effects, saying, 'I'm very sorry for the mistake, ma'am. I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, using bad gestures and bad language. I noticed the WHAT WOULD JESUS DO bumper sticker, the CHOOSE LIFE license plate holder, the FOLLOW ME TO SUNDAY SCHOOL window sign, the FISH EMBLEM on your trunk, and I naturally assumed you had stolen the car.'

That story, along with today's Gospel lesson, should make us squirm a bit, I think. None of us is a perfect Christian, nor are we expected to be. But...as Christians who readily and frequently profess what we believe, we are called to take our faith and our beliefs seriously enough to make them evident in our lives. That is really important for us to remember every day, and especially today as we welcome two children into the Body of Christ through the sacrament of baptism at our 10:30 service, and next Sunday as another child is baptized at our 8:00 service.

You remember how this works: the children's sponsors, parents and godparents, will present the children for baptism, and on the child's behalf will promise to keep Christ as the center of their lives. The rest of us will renew our own baptismal promises, vows we have made to God to follow Christ, resist evil, repent when we sin, proclaim the Good News and love our neighbor as ourselves, among other things. A vow is perhaps the most serious promise we can ever make, whether it is a baptismal vow, or a marriage vow, or a vow to serve God in a particular way. The vows we make *bind* us to do what we have said we would do. Will a policeman pull us over and lock us up if we don't? Of course not, but our failure to keep our vows judges us, morally, ethically, spiritually.

If we make these vows and do not keep them, Jesus has every right and reason to label us as hypocrites as well. But that is not the only reason our vows are important. The most obvious reason, of course, is that we are making these promises to God, our creator, redeemer, sustainer, without whom we would not be. And that should be enough. But there's still another reason: the vows we make *should* reflect the purpose and substance of our lives, our passion, the fire that Jesus came to bring to the earth. Unless our lives of faith are filled with passion and purpose, why do we bother?

William Sloane Coffin, one of the best preachers and most important Christian leaders of the twentieth century, says that "it is because we are so passionless that we are so joyless, for passion leads to the springs of gladness."

My prayer for all of us today is that as we promise to support these precious children in their lives in Christ, we may renew not only our own baptismal vows, but also that the Holy Spirit will kindle in each of us the fire of Christ's love and the desire to make it the passion of our lives. *Amen.*