

-There is a statement out there that you might be aware of (maybe that you even say once in a while). The statement is: "Keep the home fires burning." How many of you have heard someone say this or say it yourself? To the best of my knowledge and following some quick research, it seems like this statement was conjured up (or at least made popular) in World War 1 with a song common throughout Great Britain titled "Keep the Home Fires Burning". When I say "keep the home fires burning" to you this morning, what comes to mind? (ask for opinions)

-In short, it symbolizes the maintaining of a "daily [routine](#) and provide the [necessities](#) of life in a [home](#) or [community](#)." During wartime, it came to mean keeping up the important parts of "home" and "keeping the lights on" so the boys at war could find their way home again. It's a powerful reminder of how we human beings tend to, when the going gets tough, lift up the important attributes of our "nesting place and community".

-It's also an interesting statement to think about, ofcourse, during this Advent season. During a time of preparation, anticipation, (and maybe a little trepidation if you are hosting a bunch of family for Christmas like we are), "keeping the home fires burning" sounds appealing and romantic even. My mom, more than anyone I know, will bust her behind every Christmas to make our house almost sparkle with Christmas decorations and lights. Every year on Christmas Eve, we would host many of my extended family for dinner before going to Christmas Eve worship. I still vividly remember the sights and smells of those family gatherings with mald wine, eggnog, swedish meatballs, lefsa, and a fire in the fireplace. My mom once told me: "I want to make Christmas magical for you kids because Christmas was magical for me as a kid."

-These are memories of "home" that I hold dear and have become woven into the tapestry of "keeping the home fires burning" in my own context. Maybe you have similar memories.

-As we lift up the presence of our church throughout the world this Advent, especially in our talking about the church in South Africa last week with Bob, Marietta, Kim, and Rojene, I wonder if "keeping the homefires burning" can morph into something a little different.

-The prophet Zephaniah (not a very commonly read prophet in the Old Testament), says in our scripture reading today: "I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home.." I will bring you home. What does home mean for us in our world today?

-The poet Maya Angelou writes: The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned."

-Certainly John the Baptist was challenging this notion of home as a safe place when he abruptly calls out “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” John’s vision of home here is kind of uncomfortable for us of privilege living in an industrialized nation.

-“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise,” he says. Pretty simple but radical instructions. Maybe we should introduce the “John the Baptist” version of our homey saying which is: “Keep the home fires burning, and always keep the bed made, food ready, and door open for the stranger who wonders in.” This isn’t exactly the “magical” Christmas memories one holds onto.

-In September of 2010, while I was going to Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and we were living in the San Francisco Bay Area, we lived through one of the worst gas pipeline explosions in recent memory. A major underground gas line (which had not been maintained properly) caught fire through static electricity and became a huge fireball (some estimate reaching 1000 ft into the air) in the middle of a San Bruno (just south of San Francisco) neighborhood. 38 homes were destroyed and 8 people died including 3 people of one family (a 17-year old son, a father, and a grandmother) of one family heavily involved at Bethany Presbyterian Church, Abby’s church growing up. Following this tragedy, Pam and Fred (Abby’s parents), picked up Sue (the mom) from work and brought her back to their home. Her daughter, Jenine, immediately arrived that night with church members rotating in shifts to be present with them. Sue and Jenine had nowhere to go. Pam and Fred’s home became a new home for them. Because everything was incinerated at their old house, everything from a new bed to new clothes had to be sought out. But beyond just physical items, the “home fires” of Pam and Fred as well as the entire congregation of Bethany Presbyterian Church shifted. I remember Pam talking about how the Christmas of 2010 was extraordinary. Sue wouldn’t be able to move out of their house until January, so she spent Christmas with Pam and Fred. “It was one of the most hodge-podge of Christmases with Sue’s extended family, church people, Abby’s grandma Marty, and many others who joined in.” “Home” and who was a part of “home” was forever changed.

-What is “home” when you can’t go back home or when the “home fires” have permanently burned out? Whether you are Sue and Jenine, someone on the street in Missoula, or one of the hundreds of migrants waiting in limbo at the U.S. border, this question is real. Maybe we all need to take a serious look at our own concept of home.

-When starting out reading this gospel text this morning and seeing “you brood of vipers” from John the Baptist, one might think this is a pretty down and dreary text. But if one digs deeper, you discover that actually this text is one of real joy. “As the people were filled with expectation...” it reads. This is exciting stuff! Take a look at who is actually out with John in the desert. Yes, it is the people who are suffering and who

don't really have a home to go to, but it is others too: "Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" These are the people that John is calling Vipers!! The folks that he is explicitly calling out are actually participating in John's new vision of home.

-We get so caught up with "sinfulness, guilt, and bad things" when we read John's call of "repent, the time is near!" But simply put, all repent means is to "change pathways". Stop going down the path you are going and go another direction.

-Maybe this is getting at the fabric of what a deeper commitment to "home" can be (and what John the Baptist is laying out). Home is where you can feel safe, collect your thoughts and perspective, and be in true relationship, so that you can follow a new path. One could, I suppose, make the argument that true repentance does not happen without home. Home is where all people can gather in safety, no matter where they come from, in anticipation and to build up strength for the new journey ahead.

-For so many Christians, "mission work" and living out one's faith means this check-list of "converting souls". "Our lives are for converting souls to Jesus," I remember someone telling me in college. Most of you know me well enough by now for me to say that is not at all how I view my own faith, nor the faith of this church. Instead, I think a healthier (and actually more biblically based) version of mission is to live out one's faith by bringing "home" to others. As followers of Christ, our job is to make sure people feel at home: safe, supported, not alone, so that the divine has room to enter in. Whether this is our job right here in Bonner or in walking with migrants on the southern border, or somewhere else in the world, the job in my mind is the same: Instead of keeping the "home fires" burning at our own house, maybe it's time we bring the match over to the neighbor's house. May the peace and joy of this Advent season empower all of us to gain new perspective on home and may it empower us to bring that home to others who are struggling to find safety. Amen.