

When I lived in Pennsylvania, I ended up becoming pretty good friends with the girl who cut my hair. My usually introverted self wouldn't dread the hour in the chair trying to small talk because Jordan and I just had a nice, easy flow to conversation. There was one time I came in and she was veritably vibrating with excitement. "I have a new obsession!" I was so immensely curious what this could possibly be to cause this much energy. She then proceeded to tell me about the new candles she had found. They were tall and hefty and had a lengthy burn time with yummy scents to go with it, **BUT** they weren't just any candle. They were also a surprise! A present! Because, hidden somewhere within the wax was a piece of jewelry. You had no idea where in the candle it was so you couldn't just melt it down to a specific place to get it out. You had to light it and wait. Sometimes it would take only a couple of rounds, other times, it took a lot and a lot and a lot of nights enjoying the candlelight to finally get to the prize. It was like cereal boxes for adults!

The next time I came to get my hair cut, once again, she was so excited. "I got you something!" I had honestly forgotten about the candles, and then she plunked it down in my lap and was like, "It's the jewelry candle!" Now, jewelry isn't necessarily my jam, and this wasn't like every kiss begins with K level jewelry inside this candle, but I was so excited. The

surprise, the waiting, the anticipation of getting down to the good stuff had me anxious to get home and get the candle burning. Now, I don't wear it often, but the ring that came out of my candle is still sitting in the top level of my jewelry box. I see it every morning when I put my jewelry on, and this week, it reminded me of something beyond the moment when a friend surprised me with a gift out of the blue. It reminded me that sometimes you have to burn something down in order to get to something good, and I thought, huh, I think John the Baptist could get behind that kind of thinking...and could probably benefit from a nice smelling candle.

Last week was such a polite introduction to John. He emerges from the wilderness in all of his camel haired glory and expounds on the wondrous things the Messiah will come to do. Roads will be leveled and straightened, valleys will be filled, mountains will be laid low. It sounds lovely. It sounds hopeful. And then there's this week...John has got the preaching engines warmed up and revving and now well...nothing says happy Advent, Christmas is coming like being called a brood of vipers.

Once again, I am startled that so many people flocked to John when he looked like this and sounded like this. Yes, honey, let's go see the wild man in the wilderness who is talking about wrath! But I think what this does is speak to the hunger, the yearning that is pouring out of God's people in

Judea in the face of the world they live in. They are hungry for something real, for something maybe not overtly hopeful, but promising. They are yearning for the truth, for direction, for someone to tell them how all of this is going to shake out and if they can do anything in the interim to help it happen or speed along the process. So they come to John, and they get a heavy, healthy dose of truth.

John is done with a world, a people who are content to rest upon their laurels, who feel they are entitled to God's love and compassion because it's simply what they deserve because of who they are, who are unwilling to go through any sort of reflective process to deepen and strengthen their faith. John tells them that their sense of entitlement is nothing but fruit that needs to be pruned from the barrenness of their faith to make way for good fruit, for, frankly, the common sense of the gospel. The crowds ask, well, if what we've been doing isn't right, what *should* we be doing, and John—with what I have to imagine is a heavy dose of face-palming and eye-rolling—tells them that it isn't hard to figure out. If you have more than you need, give something away, if your table is full, give to someone with an empty belly, don't extort people, don't take advantage of people, be content with what you have when you are truly living a life of blessing, don't be constantly looking for more, share, love your neighbor, give of yourself. It is basic,

*human* stuff that John calls the people to, and yet, we all know how that generally goes, right? Because when a task lies before us and we know it's fairly easy, well that's the task that more often than not gets shoved to the side, because we can always get to it later.

And this is where John really drives the point home. People think he is the Messiah and he's like oooooooooo no, you think I speak with fire? Just you wait. I'm just the one to get you on the common sense bandwagon, to get your brains re-tuned to God, but the real thing is coming, and when he does...well, prepare yourselves for some smelting. John says that the Messiah will come with a winnowing fork to separate the wheat from the chaff, or in terms that actually make sense to us, the Messiah will come like an app that sorts through your phone and deletes all the junk you don't need or use, that takes all your duplicate photos and says, nope, you don't need these because they aren't useful.

Now, I think when we hear this, we tend to think about this winnowing, this separating as being wholesale. The good people over here, the bad people over there, but Jesus' winnowing is far more finicky than that, but let's face it, it's easier to imagine this if it just means those people over there and us over here, because clearly we are the wheat, right? Rather than dealing with what John is really saying, that all of us are in for some

pruning, all of us need to be smelted, all of us need to have our chaff and our wheat separated, our stuff burned down to its core parts so that the good stuff is what is left over. But let's be real, we don't want to confront that reality, because frankly, we like our junk, we like our chaff, because they give us a ready made excuse to not do the common sense stuff of the gospel.

If we're so weighed down with baggage or our impressions of what makes us not good enough, if we're judgmental of our selves, then we can say, no no, I'm not the one Jesus needs to be doing all of that justice stuff, all that love your neighbor stuff, I'm far too chaff-filled for that, he needs wheat people to do that, and we let ourselves blissfully off the hook. Y'all, that just ain't how Jesus rolls. There is no one, *no one* that is all chaff and no wheat, there is no one that is all wheat and no chaff; *we all* need to have Jesus come through and sweep away the unhelpful, unuseful, non-life-giving stuff and melt us down to our core parts, to our branches that are ready and willing to bear fruit. All of us are like this little piece of jewelry that has been covered and covered and covered with layer upon layer of wax, and Jesus shows up and dares to melt us down to our purest selves, our core selves, the self that is called to do the work of the gospel.

Let's be real, little baby Jesus didn't need to come into the world if it was all filled with wheat, and we can't really dare to think that Jesus came

for us, if we simultaneously don't think we need winnowing. And this is where I think John understood people and they're yearning...we want to be seen. We desperately want to be seen for who we are, with all the layers peeled back, the dirt cleaned off, the cruddy parts wiped away. We want to be seen for the precious jewel God created us to be that we have hidden away under layers of wax that the world says we need in order to harden us, protect us, keep us safe, and make sure that we and only we are taken care of. That yearning in us that says come, Lord Jesus, is a yearning that says come, Lord Jesus, because *I* need you, *I* need you to melt down my parts and help me see myself once again, remind me of who I was created to be, of who I am and whose I am.

And I'm not going to lie, that's a terrifying prospect, to stand before the Messiah and say, please get all this chaff out of here and show me my wheatiest self. It's terrifying because it leaves us vulnerable, without the layers of protection we've built up around our hearts, opening us up to love and be loved fully. It's terrifying because it forces us to admit that we can't do this on our own, but that God and only God can do this for us. It's terrifying because when we're left with what is life-giving and good fruit bearing, then we're left with no more excuses for not living out the gospel.

It's terrifying because it might just remind us that we are God's, as equally beloved as the person sitting next to us at work that we really don't like.

But it's also beautiful, and it is what this season is all about. When we are so excited for Jesus, even in his baby form, we are excited for someone to come into the world and dare to love us boldly down to our cores. I mean think about one of our most beloved Christmas hymns,

*Be near me Lord Jesus, I ask you to stay, close by me forever  
and love me I pray.*

We want Jesus to see us and know us and then dare to say, I'm staying here with you, and loving you, exactly as you are, because I have seen your heart and know what a precious thing it is that lies within you.

This Advent season, allow yourself to be winnowed, allow God to come in and delete all of your unnecessary apps, allow yourself to melt, to open your heart to the world and say here is the fruit I am able to bear, may it be an instrument of the gospel, given for the sake of the world. This Advent season, dare to remember that we're all going through it, we're all yearning, we're all trying, we all just want to be seen and loved, and God does that for us, and so we must dare to do it for each other as well. We all need a little trimming, a little melting down; we all need the brush away our chaff so that together, we can shine bright like the divine spark God placed within us from the very beginning. **AMEN!!!**