

Life in the country, particularly life in the country of the Midwest, comes with certain requisites. Cornfields aren't scary, they're just your backyard. It is not necessarily surprising if you look out and see a neighbor's animal wandering around your yard. I grew up with our neighbor's pheasants annoying our dogs incessantly, and now my mom has a rooster next door. You measure things in time not miles, and anything under an hour is not that long of a drive. (Felix finally learned this this year over Christmas when he declared, "Every time I ask how long it'll be to get somewhere you always answer, 'a little bit of a drive but not long! Everything is 45 minutes away!!' Yes...yes, bud, it is). When someone tells you to watch for deer on your way home, you know they're saying I love you. And...you will find the same thing in easily 9 out of 10 backyards...a burn barrel. Yes, you heard that correctly...a burn barrel.

Do not ask me why, but it's a thing in the Midwest. There is certain stuff, rather than throwing it in the garbage can, just gets taken out and thrown in the burn barrel. The night after we open Christmas presents is Kristin's favorite night, because she knows she gets to take stuff out and burn it. It's always been her job, and her Upstate New York husband never ceases to be like, what in the world?! Why?! They don't burn things in Maryland!! No, no they don't...but when Kristin is home, she goes all

Fahrenheit 451 and declares it's a pleasure to burn. It's weird, but it's who we are. When we would have bonfires when I was little, it was always a question of what you could throw in the fire rather than throwing it away. I can tell you how fast a Hershey's wrapper burns—it's fast. There is something oddly cathartic in all of this, and I know that after the last month of California wildfires that is a rough thing to say, but within the contained and safe confines of a Midwestern burn, there is a weird sense of satisfaction, of letting things go, and starting over.

We have a tendency to see fire as this all-consuming, negative, destructive force, and again, when you see pictures of California, it's hard to break out of that mentality and yet...there's another side to it, there are other ways to look at it, which Bible study reinforced to me this week and which our lessons really just drive home with grace and assurance. I mean you all know I love the thoughts that come out of Bible study, but this week, they blew my mind because I had no idea that there were certain pinecones that cannot release their seeds unless they have experienced fire. Some pinecones will hang on trees for years, long after their seeds have matured, but cannot release them to create new trees until they experience heat. Which also means that the tree they're growing on is a product of another pinecone who knows how many years ago experiencing fire and finally

being able to let their seeds go. It was one of those moments where I was like...nature is remarkable...because how is that a thing? Something cannot reach its full growth and potential without experiencing the one thing that we think would destroy it...who knew? Well...honestly? Isaiah...

We're fairly well acquainted with the first portion of our first lesson, Isaiah's call story. We know the vision of God's whole robe filling up Isaiah's perspective, God wondering whom to send in light of the people needing a new messenger, and Isaiah proclaiming all the reasons why he is not the one. There are words about unclean lips and unclean people and then God just flings all of that away with the touch of one flaming coal to Isaiah's lips. And after this cleansing, God asks again, who shall go to my people, and Isaiah is ready, here I am; send me! And if it all ended there, it's a nice story, profound and encouraging, but then we get the rest of the story...

God is like, GREAT!! Now, the people I'm sending you to! They aren't going to listen! They aren't going to comprehend a word you're saying! They're minds shall be dull, their ears shall be stopped, and their eyes shall be shut! And Isaiah is like...ooooook, well, for how long do I have to do this? Already wondering why he was so eager to say here I am. And God says, well, until everything is pretty much destroyed. Cities laid waste, the land in desolation, the people gone; once everything is empty, then you

can stop speaking. Essentially, speak until I send the people into exile, until Babylon has taken over, and everything seems at a loss, then you can cool it. It's awful and not encouraging at all. If there was ever a job description for the most thankless job in scripture, I think we just found it. Go preach to a people who aren't going to listen, and keep preaching until I destroy everything! Go get 'em, Tiger!

But...then God changes the narrative a bit. God talks about burning. God talks about how in the midst of the devastation, in the midst of the destruction and the pain, a stump will remain standing. It doesn't seem like much, a stump, big deal, but...fast forward five chapters. Isaiah 11: "A shoot shall spring out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." That one little stump that God says will remain? Out of the brokenness, the burned desolation, out of what seems like the end of everything, will come a shoot, a branch, who will be...Jesus. It seems like the end of all things, and yet, God does not leave God's people without hope. It doesn't lessen the pain of the exile, or the fact that their relationship has been broken and needs deep, intricate mending, but it does say, God isn't giving up. It says God remains and that God can make the most incredible thing out of what seems impossible. From darkness, light. From desolation, abundance. From devastation, hope.

And let's be real, it's not easy to see this when you're in the midst of it, right? No one experiencing a fire is going to think, but imagine all the pine trees that will grow from these cones! The people of Israel weren't going into exile thinking, but this will make things so much better in the long run. And that's not God's expectation, to just blindly have God's people go through pain, because it'll eventually get better and there will be meaning. God's expectation, God's hope is that we, God's people, do not give up, we don't cease to see the possibility in the midst of the hard, we don't cease to believe that God can take the most impossible of situations and out of it spring something new.

And I know that right now, this feeling, this out of the dark has to come the light feeling feels impossible. It is impossible to not be constantly lambasted by the news and have it feel like a mallet just hitting you deeper and deeper into the ground until you have no way of getting back up, but... what did Paul say to the Corinthians? "Unless you have come to believe in vain." Faith isn't for those moments when everything is easy and makes complete sense and the waters are calm. Faith is for those moments when everything is hard, nothing makes sense, and the boat is rocking so much you wish you had taken Dramamine. Our belief in a God who does the impossible cannot be in vain. If we think that from desolation God could

bring about something new; if we think that a shoot from a tiny stump of a family tree could be the Messiah; if we think that God could say I have the perfect thing to shatter the bonds of death and it's going to be my son, then we cannot give up hope that we can work through the hard, through the impossible. Our faith is what is going to carry us through the chaos. To let it go now would be to have believed in vain. You might be feeling like the world around you is that desolate plain that has been laid bare, and yet somewhere in all that desolation is a pinecone ready to break free of its seeds, a seedling breaking through the charred remains of a stump, a tiny pinprick of light shining out and saying, I'm still here.

And maybe we need to be reminded of those tiny pinpricks of light. Here are some headlines from the Good News Network over the last couple of days: England's equivalent of the Audobon Society has grown by 30% and is watching wildlife surge with the new land purchase. A world-record holding jump roper saved a drowning teenager's life by using his jump rope. A women in Moneta had bought a lottery ticket on Christmas Eve and then put it in her Bible and forgot about it until she heard that the winner had been sold in her town, she pulled it out and realized she had won \$1 million. UNESCO is supporting a Remission for Reading program in Brazilian prisons where inmates can get four days shaved from their sentence for

every book they read with an accompanying book report turned in. The last living piano student of Rachmaninoff is 100 years old this year and put out an album at 97.

And if none of those are enough or feel too far away and removed from today, from where you're sitting. Take a deep breath. There is air in your lungs. If you need a hug, someone in this building would be there to give you one. You had gas in your car to get here this morning. Each of us sitting here can clock at least a handful of mistakes we've made in our lives, maybe even in the last 24 hours and yet we hear, "I have called you by name. You are mine." By the grace of God, you are who you are and who you are is wonderful.

Our God is a God who looks at a burn barrel and says, I can bring new life out of that, who looks at a broken, messy world of humanity and says, I can redeem that, who looks at our hearts and says, I can love that. We have the ability to be the pinecone that comes through the fire with something new. We have the chance to force our way through the darkness and shoot out from the desolation and bring life and hope in the midst of what seems barren. The world might feel impossible and yet the call is there, Here I am, send me. There has to be hope out there. There has to be light out there, so let it begin with me. **AMEN!!!**