

## **“Burn the Chaff”**

*Reading: Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12*

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I can't imagine many of us today have actually done the job of winnowing. There are places in the world where it's still done, but these days a combine harvester does the job, even for those few of us who work in agriculture. Winnowing is the process of separating the inedible outer husk, known as chaff, from a kernel of grain. In biblical times they would have taken the grain to a threshing floor, which would be an elevated spot or somewhere else that would catch the wind. The grain would be threshed, which was how they loosened the chaff from the kernel, and then they would winnow it by tossing it up in the air with a winnowing fork and the wind would blow the chaff away. In the Bible the image is usually of the chaff being separated and then burned; it's basically waste that's getting in the way of the grain you want.

I was trying to think of a good analogy for us today, since even though I can explain all of that and I can go on Wikipedia and look up what a winnowing fork looks like, but I can't really relate to it. I don't have to winnow and deal with chaff. But maybe there are other things that can help us get a feel for chaff. Maybe we could compare chaff to junk mail: it's annoying, it's in the way, it's a barrier to the letter or Christmas card you really want, you have to sort through it and dispose of it or it will pile up and overwhelm you. It's chaff, junk, meaningless fluff. Most of it is annoying but harmless, but then there are those junk mailings that are actively trying to scam you, so you have to watch out and dispose of them properly.

John the Baptist ends his sermon in our passage for today by announcing that he will be followed by one “more powerful,” whose “winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor, gathering His wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” We often read about John the Baptist during Advent as we prepare for Christmas, because John was a forerunner to Jesus who set the stage for Him and announced His arrival. Jesus didn't just appear out of the blue; His birth had been promised and foretold for generations. It's relatively inoffensive to say that Jesus is God's Son; the question is who God is, what sort of God is He, and what does God want by sending His Son? The announcement made by John the Baptist helps answer that. He points us to some of the expectations Jesus is fulfilling.

Some people picture Jesus as a Mister Rogers-like figure who was always nice, always pleasant, never made a fuss. Jesus is much less threatening to our comfort if He's just plain vanilla nice, and if His only real expectation of us is that we would be nice to one another. We all have different definitions of “nice,” most of which focus on you not judging me or making me uncomfortable, so that sort of Jesus is pretty easy to accept – and to ignore. But that's not the Jesus we hear John announcing, even though Christmas gives us a picture of a sweet baby Jesus in a manger. That baby is one who is “more powerful” than the apocalyptic figure of John the Baptist, the animal skin-wearing prophet living out in the wilderness calling you to repent. That baby is the one foretold by hundreds of years of prophecies, some of which are full of blood and fire and sudden terror. That baby is the fulfillment of God's repeated promises to make things right, and making things right involves some serious house cleaning.

We have an ongoing debate in our house about what constitutes cleaning. For me, if it's not on the floor or the kitchen counter, it's not dirt. If I can't see it, it's not dirt. If I get the dishes washed, the counter clean, and the floors vacuumed, then the house is clean and I'm good to go. But Pastor Carey doesn't always agree, and she comes along behind me with her dust rag and goes around the whole house dusting everything, finding dirt I was perfectly happy to ignore. For me, as long as you don't disturb the dust, it's a uniform layer over everything and you don't notice it. Pastor Carey disagrees.

And of course she's right. Sometimes it's true that a quick vacuuming of the floors is all it takes to get things in better shape, but every so often you need to give things a good, thorough cleaning. John is announcing that this baby we celebrate at Christmas is going to do some serious house cleaning. He's taking out the trash, sorting through the junk mail, scrubbing the forgotten corners. Deep cleaning involves interrupting your schedule and moving furniture around, it involves digging into that pile of boxes in the garage and asking whether you really need these things, it involves getting on your hands and knees and getting face to face with the grime in your bathroom.

The birth of Jesus is not only a message of comfort, it's the message that you will not be comfortable until you are clean. It's not just the message that God has come and offered you an invitation to join His family, it's the message that He has invited you so that He can sift through your life and burn the chaff that you've been ignoring or holding onto for so long. That's not an easy message, but it's so much better and more powerful than the saccharine, ambiguous messages about Christmas we usually hear.

This is the fulfillment of a very old promise. The Psalms and the Old Testament prophets repeatedly used that image of chaff as a descriptor for those who are on the wrong side of God's plan. Psalm 1 speaks of the wicked being like chaff blown away in the wind. The enemies of God and His people are often described as chaff, and sometimes even God's people themselves are chaff when they have committed themselves to a worthless pursuit of hope in things other than God that will not last. The idea is not only that sin and evil and wickedness are harmful and enslaving, the idea is that they are also chaff, junk mail: they look like they have substance, but they blow away in the slightest breeze. There's no nourishment there, there's no solidity to them. They're an obstacle to getting to the good fruit God is looking for. For ages, God has been promising to clean house, to blow away and burn the chaff, to sift and sort and scrub until He gets to what matters and what is worth keeping. John the Baptist is telling us that Jesus is the fulfillment of those long promises.

Isaiah spoke of this many times. One of our familiar Advent passages comes from Isaiah 11, where the prophet speaks of a shoot coming up from the stump of Jesse, and the Spirit of Lord resting on Him. In that day, Isaiah says, "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them." It's a beautiful picture of the peace and harmony promised by God through the work of Jesus. But first must come judgment with righteousness. "With righteousness He will judge the needy, with justice He will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth; with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be His belt and faithfulness the sash around His waist." Before you can have a clean house, you have to take out the trash. Before you can have fresh bread, you have to separate the chaff from the wheat.

Last week our message was focused on being busy about God's work while we wait on the return of Jesus. The master expects His servants to be about the work He gave them to do while He is away, and so our Advent preparations for Christmas involve acts of love, mercy, hope, and faithfulness. But more than that, we prepare remembering that the master is returning to winnow the wheat. He's looking for people of substance, people who bear fruit, not people made of chaff. So we prepare for Christmas by cleaning house, by examining the state of our souls and making sure there is no chaff.

So what does that look like? How do we know chaff when we see it? Chaff is anything inconsequential in the sight of God. It's anything that will blow away when God breathes, anything that turns to mist in God's light. Sin would certainly count as chaff, but we could also say that there are all sorts of worthless things we devote ourselves to that aren't sinful but also aren't substantial. That doesn't mean we should feel guilty if we aren't constantly doing weighty things and being dour and serious all the time, because that would be exhausting. God calls us to rest; His burden is light. But it does mean in this season of Advent we are given the opportunity to weigh the substance of our actions and deal with the chaff accordingly.

Not unlike junk mail, the chaff in our lives is often the most appealing and exciting and promising at first glance. Chaff promises instant results with no sacrifice. "You may already have won a million dollars," it tells us. Chaff tells us to think about ourselves first. Chaff invites us to compromise just a little bit, because it will be okay and it doesn't really matter in a little thing like this. Chaff promises us big savings now and hopes you don't read the fine print to see that it will cost you dearly down the road. Chaff calls you into the shallows, because going deeper takes effort and doesn't pay off right away. Chaff lulls you and numbs you and diverts your attention away from anything that might be difficult but worth it.

We all have those things in our lives, even if it's not actual sin. We all are tempted by those guilty little pleasures that seem so harmless, but they don't really contribute to our substance. Again, that doesn't mean we should feel guilty if we're not constantly praying and feeding the poor. Maybe those habits are genuinely restful; there's nothing wrong with that. But the danger comes when those pleasures or habits or practices are unexamined, when they become an end in themselves, when they start becoming consuming and misleading. God is looking for His trees to bear good fruit; what is your life for otherwise? We need to have the maturity to burn the chaff.

But then there are also the sins, and those are certainly chaff, and they run the risk of making *us* chaff. The sins John and Jesus confronted time and time again were often related to self-righteousness, that belief that I've done everything I need to do to be justified before God, that through my actions I have built up enough goodness within myself. John confronted those among the religious elite who came out to him, many of whom thought their religious pedigree was enough to buy them special favor with God. But John tells them that no, what God is looking for is the fruit of repentance, the fruit of being aware enough of your own need to confess your sin to God and confess that He is your only hope. Those religious folks who came out to hear John were putting their trust in the fact that they were descendants of Abraham; we might put our trust in our church attendance or our good deeds or not being as bad as so-and-so. We all have that same temptation, though it might not look the same as it did for the Pharisees. I might not be a saint, but at least I don't do *that*, we tell ourselves. But John tells them that their pedigree is pointless before God; He's looking for

repentance, which bears fruit that will last. Or we could look to what Paul had to say in his letter to the Romans, that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's ancient promises to bring the nations together under His reign. That means pedigree is meaningless, because the only determinant for whether you're wheat or chaff is whether you have come to Christ. He is what gives us substance.

If that's what chaff is, why do we need the reminder to get rid of it? Why would we be reluctant to burn the chaff? Why do we love our sin, the thing that hurts us so much, that we cling so tightly to it? Why do we hold on to the things that keep us from becoming the deep, beautiful, fearless people God has called us to be? Why do we instead choose to be chaff? For the same reason we so often forget that money doesn't buy happiness: because it's seductive in the short term, and it's not until much later that we look back and recognize the seduction. I don't think I'm trading myself for sin, I'd rather think I'm trading myself for something more acceptable, like having a good time, or security, or leisure.

Maybe when I clean, I'm afraid to get too far into the dark corners. Maybe I'm afraid of how much dirt is there. Maybe I don't think I have time to deal with that grime. Maybe I'm afraid that if I look into the darkness of my soul, I'll find more of myself in the darkness than I think is there, and I'll have to confront the reality of the judgment I hold in my heart, or the grudges I bear, or the nastiness, or racism, or self righteousness, or whatever.

The opportunity is before us to celebrate the coming of God with clean hearts, with lives free of chaff, with branches ready to bear good fruit. Burning the chaff may not be easy and it may not be quick, but it leaves you with the solid core of a substantial life in the sight of God. You can bring your chaff to God – whatever it is, whether it's a bad habit or a sin or an addiction or self-righteousness – and you can trust that God will be faithful to make room for you to bear good fruit in place of that chaff.



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