

“Directing the Wind”

John 3:1-17

17 February, 2008

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Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’”

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?”

No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Prayer.

When my father
Made the decision to
Walk away from his
Well paying corporate finance job
In 1968
When I was seven
To go back to school

And begin serving as a lay preacher
When he was forty-two
The world thought he was nuts.
His family did, too.

I remember in the summer of '68
Standing before the front doors
Of his first church,
Aptly named “Open Meadows UMC”

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Standing by the wrought iron railing
Looking out across the road
And seeing fields of wheat
in three directions.
It was hot.
The wheat was golden brown.
I could see,
And for the first time I could
understand,
The connection
Between the invisible waves that
swept across the fields
And the blowing of the hot, summer
wind.
I will never forget that beautiful
landscape
Awash in a sea of wind-swept grain.

In the 40 years that have passed
Since that hot summer day
I've learned a few things about the
wind.

1. We'd like to believe that we can
direct the wind.
We can't.
Though our attempt at planting
Snow fences every fall
May go a long way towards safer roads
The occasional drift
Still will find a way
to make the unsuspecting driver
skid into the ditch.
The unanticipated white out
Will cause the 36 car pile up
In spite of the best engineering
On the planet.

2. We think we are the only ones
who have wind.
We live in such small, self-centered
worlds
Rarely leaving town,

Let alone the region, state, or country
That we begin to mistakenly
Believe that all the world
Beyond our experience
Is the same
And that we don't need to be
concerned with it.
And there probably isn't wind there,
anyways,
Because we can't see or feel it.
New Orleans becomes one and the
same as Iraq.
Kenya might just as well as be
Ruwanda or Darfur.
What's the difference anyways?
We ask rhetorically.
They don't have any stinkin wind;
It only blows in West Walworth!

3. I've noticed there are both good
and bad
aspects of wind.
Just as the wind can turn a windmill
Pumping water for the public's good
That very same wind can
Blow the windmill down
Leading to regional flooding.
That same wind that brings the
satisfaction
To children flying a kite
Can bring despair and tears
When the kite gets blown into the
trees.
The same wind that dries the plane
Whips down canyons walls
driving Santa Anna fires.
Wind show no favorites
Makes no distinction between
the righteous and the unrighteous.
The same wind that had given me a
pleasurable sail
Also swamped my boat.

Allow me to bring these observations
A little closer to home;
To hang some Biblical flesh
On these old bones.
Jesus tells the slinking Nicodemus,
"The wind blows where it chooses,
and you hear the sound of it,
but you do not know where it comes
from
or where it goes.
So it is with everyone who is born of
the Spirit."

My personal experience
Confirms the accuracy of Jesus'
observation.
We hear the sound of the Spirit.
We experience the Spirit though our
senses.
I can feel God's approval
When I've made the right choice.
And I certainly can feel
The disapproval of God
When I've exercised my freedom
To make the wrong choice.
As you reflect on your own experience,
Wouldn't you agree?
The Spirit does affect our thoughts.
It slips into the prayer life.
And sometimes
It will even smack us right between
the eyes
With a reality check.
Everyone experiences it;
But only the few recognize it
For what it truly is.

We hear the sound of the wind
And we are made aware of its
presence.
Less I push Jesus' metaphor too far,
I believe,
Because it is my experience,

That there are times in life in which
There is no perception of wind.
It may be blowing elsewhere,
But it isn't blowing here,
We think to ourselves.
The Greek root for Spirit
Is pneuma,
Which literally means "breath."
One can think of pneumonia
As a disease of breathing,
Or pneumatic tires
As tires inflated with air or breath.
What I believe is Jesus' intent
Is to say is that where there is
Air and breath
There is the Spirit of God,
Whether or not we perceive its
presence.
Unfortunately, his intent
Is often lost in translation.
But it is vitally important to
understanding his word:
The Spirit is omnipresent.
It is never further away
Than your next breath.
The problem is that
We are memory dependent creatures.
We fail to be faith dependent disciples.
We forget;
Especially when times are affluent and
abundant.
Like Israel
We forget how close God really is;
How intimate God has made his
dwelling in us.
We forget
Because we become too numb in self-
indulgence
To perceive the presence of the ever-
present Spirit
Of our Heavenly Father.

We don't know from where the wind comes,
Jesus tells us.
The Spirit is absolutely independent
To make its presence known
Or to remain hidden away
(But ever present)
At any given moment.
This leads us to mistakenly
Believe that we can engage God in a game
Of divine fetch
As if there were no limits
To our petitions and intercessions.
We pray for winning lottery numbers
And when we lose
We whine like spoiled children.
Oh please!
God's will trumps our will
Ten out of ten times.

When we fail to get our way,
We've failed to be obedient disciples.
We have failed to discern or follow
The will of God.
Yes, we are told
To ask
And it will be given.
But where we fail
Is when we are too impatient
to hear the rest of the thought:
We are told to ask
what the will of God is
In this particular circumstance.
This is why
We mistakenly believe that
God somehow pops into
And out from life,
With seemingly sporadic randomness.
When we ask
"What is God's will"
we refocus and become aware
of the Spirit already in our midst;

of the Spirit who had never left our side.

We don't know
Where the Spirit goes.
All the barriers that
We like to place
Somehow get circumvented
By the relentless nature of the Spirit.
Barriers are built by humans:
Barriers of class, order, sexuality,
religion, faith, values, and belief.
Barriers are created
By the implicit violence
Of assumptions,
Labels of disabilities or retardation,
Of rich or poor
Or black or white,
And by choosing a brush
To paint the world
that is any broader
than the narrowest possible brush
that paints on a person-centered
canvas.
Three strikes and you're out
Is a barrier we like to use
To justify locking someone up
For the rest of their life
Or outright executing them.
But we fail to consider the
Presence and power of the Spirit
Even in the lungs of the condemned.
Even homeless shelters,
Noble as they may be
(and they truly are),
labeling someone as homeless
allows us to inflict the violence of
accommodation
because we never seek to understand
and correct the underlying problem of
individuals
that contribute to their homelessness.

So, where does this leave us?
What truth
Does this metaphor convey
That builds a foundation for faith?

1. Ultimately, God is in control; not humankind.
Less we throw up our hands
In self-serving fatalism
Consider the four-thousand year history
Of our awareness of God's initiative
Into the human condition.
God has taken responsibility for this creation.
God has made every effort to improve
Our circumstance.
We are in the sorry state of affairs
Specifically because we have failed to be
An obedient people,
Both collectively,
And as individuals,
Present company included!

2. God acts and reacts according to God's motives.
Not ours.
Sometimes we know God's motives.
Sometimes we think we know God's motives.
But mostly, we don't.
God's greater plan
goes beyond the horizon of our experience.
God's greater plan
Exceeds the limits of our earthly life spans.
God's greater plan
May, or may not, be synchronized with our plans.
But know this as true,

Based on our scripture, tradition,
history, and experience
God's greater plan
Is always in our self-interest;
It is always for our benefit.
It is always for the good.

3. Finally, I believe we can take away from this passage for this morning, especially as we consider it through the lens of Lent,
the fact that the driving nature behind the passion and death of Jesus wasn't driven by human motives, as we are often tempted to assume. It wasn't.
We can't blame Pilate or Herod or Judas or the Jews
For what happened to Jesus,
Because it was God's will
That worked through them
To bring about a far greater divine motive.
And that motive was to atone and to save.
It was, and is,
God's intent
To bring you forgiveness of your sins,
By means of Jesus' death upon the cross,
And to give you the gift of eternal life,
Won for us
With his victory over the grave.

"The wind blows where it chooses, :
Jesus tells Nicodemus,
"and you hear the sound of it,
but you do not know
where it comes from
or where it goes.
So it is with everyone
who is born of the Spirit."
Because of this passage

We know:
God is in control.
God's ways are not our ways;
yet this is good,
Because God always acts for our
benevolence.
And it is God's desire
To bring us forgiveness and salvation.
The Word of the Lord.
Amen.