

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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Trinity Sunday
John 3:1-17

On Understanding the Wind

As those who live just over the hill from the next town to the east, that is Livingston, we may think that we know what wind is all about. Livingston is indeed one of the windiest places in Montana, if not the windiest. Other towns in central Montana rate right up there such as Great Falls and Big Timber. But Livingston isn't even in the top 10 of windy cities in the US. Some may think that it's Chicago since it's known as the Windy City. But once you've lived there, as I have, you find out that Chicago has that moniker not for the atmospheric wind, but for all the hot air that emanates from Chicago politicians. It may come as a surprise then to find out that according to the Weather Channel, Amarillo, Texas is the windiest city in the US. Amarillo, Texas is a long way from here. But I'd argue that we still know a lot about wind.

One of the funny things about wind is that you can't see it—literally anyway. We can see evidence of wind as we see the movement of objects that are rustled by the moving air. We can't really hear wind itself either. What we hear is the result of the rapid movement of air. So we can hear noise that is made when rapidly moving air is blowing through or around something. By the way, it's through the careful use and direction of moving air that results in some of the most beautiful musical sounds. The organ and the flute are 2 such wind instruments that we hear frequently in this place. But it remains that you can't really see or hear wind itself.

Of our 5 senses, it the sense of feel that is the only one than can actually sense wind in and of itself. For the force of the moving air in wind can place pressure on our bodies that indeed then registers the presence of the wind.

Visual artists have had to be creative when portraying wind. In addition to depicting the results of wind in how it affects various objects, sometimes artists will draw curlicues and wavy or squiggly lines in the sky to evoke a sense of the movement of air. When we see such visualizations, we know immediately what they are eliciting since we know what wind is.

There is a lot of wind in the Bible. And in this case I am not referring to the hot air kind of wind for which Chicago is known. Wind appears in the very beginning of the Bible when it is mentioned as the breath of God breathing life into the creation that was being formed. In both of the original biblical languages—Hebrew and Greek—the words for wind can also mean breath and spirit. So when we read about the spirit of God, or the breath of God, or the wind itself, there are often nuances and layers of meaning to be uncovered and explored.

It's appropriate for us to be considering wind today as we lift up the mystery of the Trinity and of how we experience God in history and in our lives. While Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the traditional names for the three parts or aspects or persons of the one God, even those terms are less than fully reflective of the fullness of the Triune God.

Jesus himself spoke often of the other two parts of this Trinitarian understanding of God. This is what he was talking about one night when a learned leader of the Jews named Nicodemus sought out Jesus to learn more about him.

Presumably, Nicodemus came to Jesus in the darkness of night because he didn't want to risk being seen with Jesus. The risk to him was that if other Jews saw him with Jesus it might suggest that Nicodemus was somehow not fully confident in his religious identity as a faithful Jew. And yet, there

was something winsome about Jesus that caused Nicodemus to want to know more. In spite of his intention to do everything that he thought was required of him to live in God's favor, there was something that caused Nicodemus to question that maybe he should be doing more. And maybe this obviously holy man named Jesus could clue him in on what more he could be or should be doing.

Nicodemus is not all that different from many religious people today. There are those who strive to do everything that they believe is required of them in order to live holy and upright lives. There are those among us—and perhaps even some of us—who are convinced that it falls to them to do all the right things and not do all the wrong things in order to be considered holy in the eyes of God. And even after living this way for years—seeking to live as they believe God requires them to live—there is still a seed of doubt or a sliver of suspicion that maybe there is more to be done. Maybe there is something that they are missing.

Being the perceptive person that he is, Jesus responds to Nicodemus in such a way that he is not only addressing this pious Jewish leader, but those of us today who harbor the same doubts. Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” (Jn. 3:3)

This cryptic declaration by Jesus is more than puzzling to Nicodemus. It is actually quite distressing to him. He takes Jesus at his word and immediately realizes that having been born as an infant many years ago, it is simply beyond his own power and ability to enter into being born again. He is an adult and with an adult body there is no returning to the womb for another time to be born. He would have much rather that Jesus either assured him that he is already doing everything right, or that he would be able to give Nicodemus a short list—a punch list of sorts—in which Nicodemus could add to his pious living in such a way that he could rest assured in his having done everything he needed to do.

But no, Jesus talks in a way that simply does not fit the religious world view of Nicodemus.

Jesus attempts to clarify what he is saying when he goes on, “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.” (Jn. 3:5-8)

So there Jesus goes and talks about the wind and the Spirit in the same sentence. And what he is telling Nicodemus (and us) is that all of his own attempts at holy living are of the flesh. And as such they will serve him in the flesh as long as he is alive in the flesh. In other words, whatever is to be his life-span is the extent to which his living in the flesh will benefit him. His own attempts of the flesh will perish when his own flesh perishes—at his time of death.

Just as the wind is something that we experience and can point to when we see evidence of it, understanding the wind is nevertheless not fully within our grasp. Wind is not something that we can fully harness and control and predict and manipulate. Wind is something more mysterious and unpredictable and surprising. That's what it is to live as one who is born of the Spirit—born of the breath or wind of God.

In Jesus' covert conversation in the cover of night with Nicodemus, Jesus is once again proclaiming one of the central truths of the salvation that comes from God. It is salvation that comes as a gift of grace. It is not meted out as a reward for righteous living. Salvation is not something that is earned by paying the right price, remitting dues, or checking off the boxes on a list of prerequisites.

From the time before Nicodemus until our time today, we can continue to get ourselves tied up in knots of uncertainty when we get caught up in understanding righteous living as a way of earning God's grace and favor—both in this life and in the life to come.

Jesus is reminding us that being born from above is a gift from God by way of the Spirit. It is mysterious and unpredictable which makes it a more amazing gift than ever.

This conversation with Nicodemus concludes with what is arguably the single most quoted verse in all of the New Testament—John 3:16. “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.” That is then followed up with an equally important verse, “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.” (Jn. 3:17)

My friends, when we read these two verses in the context of Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus, it becomes clear that Jesus is not talking about the decisions or declarations that we make that results in our eternal life with God, as much as it is about the decisions and declarations we make in response to God's grace and favor given in God's Son Jesus.

The question for each of us here today is: how do we respond to the good news of Jesus in each of our lives?

Today we are commissioning those from among our congregation who will be traveling to the Fort Peck Reservation in northeast Montana this week. This is the 4th year in a row that our congregation is sending a delegation of Christians to share in faith and fellowship and Christian community with the Christians in that special part of Montana. These travelers go with Christian joy, and we send them with Christian joy. For the service that will be rendered is all in response to the grace and love that has been given by God and experienced as a gift of the wind and Spirit of God.

It will be a joy to hear about their experiences upon their return to Bozeman at the end of the week. Based on reports of previous delegations who have traveled there, one thing is absolutely certain—the group will experience wind, a lot of wind blowing across the vast expanse of that part of God's creation. My hope is that as they feel the wind, see evidence of the wind, and hear the results of the wind, that they will be reminded of Jesus' words to 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.” (Jn. 3:8)