

Wind From Heaven

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Trinity Sunday, May 29, 1994. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

If you were a Jew, living in the time of Jesus, you couldn't help but see a connection between the wind and the Spirit of God. In Hebrew, the same word is used for both. The word "ruach" stood for three things. It meant breath - what God breathed into Adam's nostrils to make him a living being. It also meant "wind" - the powerful wind the Psalmist spoke of that breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon and twists the oaks and strips the forests bare. The word also means "Spirit" - the Spirit of God - the supernatural power of God that gives us a new birth even when we're old.

"Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night." It was night. The busy world was hushed. The fever of the work day was over. And Jesus sat and talked with Nicodemus in the dimly lit room. He spoke of the mysterious, supernatural work of God in our lives whereby God makes old people new; gives us a new identity as God's children whereby we see ourselves, no longer, primarily in terms of our race or nationality or gender, but as God's children.

But Nicodemus couldn't understand. He couldn't understand, even though he was a religious teacher and leader. So Jesus used an illustration. Maybe a gust of wind blew up from the Kidron valley into the Old City of Jerusalem - gently moaning as it ebbed and flowed through the dark, deserted streets. And Jesus said, "Listen to the wind, Nicodemus!" "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.'

The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit."

Now what does Jesus have to say to us here - to us who long for a new beginning in our own lives - to us who long for a new beginning for our church? I hear Jesus telling us four things - not three - but four.

First, Jesus tells us that "*the wind blows*" - the Spirit is always on the move like the wind. From the beginning to the end of the Bible, the Spirit is forever moving. Read the first page of the Bible! "The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the water" on the eve of creation. Later, when Israel was in captivity in Babylon, the Spirit of God blew upon the scattered, dry bones that Israel had become and gave them new life. It was the Spirit of God who spoke through the prophets. The Spirit of God descended upon Jesus at his baptism and empowered his ministry. The Spirit of God that burst upon the early Christians like the sound of a mighty wind and enabled them to speak boldly about Jesus. In the last chapter of the Bible we hear the Spirit inviting us to come and take the free gift of the water of life. So from the beginning to the end of the Bible we hear of the ceaseless activity of the Spirit of God giving the entire world and God's people new life and new beginnings.

Sometimes the Spirit blows over the world like a hurricane, tearing down walls that divide people, converting people suddenly and dramatically. Sometimes the Spirit blows upon us like a gentle breeze as when the Spirit helps us live our every day lives, raise our children, get along with our fellow workers, and serve Christ in ordinary ways.

imperceptibly that we don't feel the Spirit's presence and

Sometimes the Spirit blows so ~~gently that we feel as if the Spirit has~~
~~abandoned us.~~ We feel spiritually like a hot summer day - 100% humidity - 100° -
and not the slightest movement of air. The heat saps our strength. We don't want to
do anything. We're depressed. We feel as though we're going to suffocate spiritually.
We long for a gentle, cooling breeze. We listen for the sound of the wind in the pine
trees. We cry out for the Spirit of God, the Wind from heaven, to blow upon us and
give us new life; to give our church new life. ^{The Spirit is there ... but moving imperceptibly. If the Spirit}
^{were with us ... a great sucking sound would be heard} ~~And though~~ we might wait long - the
^{son} breeze picks up - and the Spirit of God begins to blow harder upon us, giving us new
life. The wind blows - the Spirit of God moves.

Second, Jesus tells us that "the wind blows wherever *it pleases.*" We can't
manipulate the Spirit of God. No man or woman, no church or denomination, no
minister can control the Spirit. Money can't buy the Spirit. Money can't guarantee
that the Holy Spirit will blow upon our church with new life according to our desires.
Neither does the lack of money hinder the Wind of God from giving a church a new
beginning.

I think of the story of the Church in China. At the time of the communist
revolution nearly fifty years ago all foreign missionaries were either killed or
forced to leave. Communication ended with the church in China. We Western
Christians lamented the fate of the small struggling church missionaries left behind.
We almost equated the withdrawal of Western missionaries with the withdrawal of
God's Spirit. But in the last several years Christians have returned to China to
discover the wind of God blows wherever it pleases. The church has grown by leaps
and bounds. In 1948 there were 5 million believers in China. Today there are over 30

million believers - perhaps as many as 80 million. When asked about this remarkable growth one woman said, "We go out ready to preach the gospel, ready to go to jail, and ready to die for Jesus' sake."

The American church, the wealthiest church in the world, always finds itself low on cash; yet the Chinese church is too busy carrying out the mission of Jesus to notice their poverty. The Spirit of God, like the wind, blows wherever God pleases.

Third, Jesus tells us that "the wind blows wherever it pleases. *You hear its sound.*" We can't see the Spirit, but the Spirit has effects. A year ago last December we had a powerful wind storm. The wind howled. The house shuddered and creaked. We can't see the wind but we hear it. We see its effects. And when the Spirit of God blows upon us we can hear and see the effects.

I think of Wind of God that blew upon 18th century England during the Wesleyan revivals. The Holy Spirit converted individuals to Christ. The Holy Spirit gave new birth to crusty, sacrilegious and blaspheming coal miners and factory workers that the established church had ignored. They stopped swearing. They stopped wasting their money on alcohol. They began providing for their families. They were born again by the Spirit of God.

But not only individuals, but society as well experienced a new birth. Out of the Wesleyan revival grew the anti-slavery movement, the reform of factories, child-labor laws, public education for poor children, foreign missions, and women in the ministry - at least in the Methodist ministry. Some scholars believe that England was spared the violent, bloody revolution France experienced as a result of how individuals and society were reformed by the preaching and ministry of John Wesley

and the early Methodists.

The Holy Spirit changes lives and society. Surely it was the Holy Spirit which led John Miller Dickey, the minister of this church, to establish Lincoln University in 1852. Surely the Holy Spirit led people in this church to speak out for open housing in the fifties and to establish the Neighborhood Services Center, the Senior Center and the preschool. The Spirit changes society as well as individuals.

But each new generation needs a fresh outbreak of the wind of the Spirit. Surely we can hear the sound of God's Spirit in the laughter and prayers of the ministers of Oxford, from the various denominations, when we gather. Whenever a Church becomes stagnant and introverted it needs the Holy Spirit to blow upon it and give it new life - to change individuals and society.

Fourth, Jesus tells us that, "... you do not know from where it comes or where it goes". The Spirit of God is mysterious in its origin and destination. Nicodemus wanted to know "how". He wanted logical, rational explanations. "How can a man be born when he is old?" "How can this be?" Nicodemus was a good Presbyterian. He was a lot like me. I like to know how. I like rational explanations. How do we get the Spirit to give us new life? What books should I read? What information should I gather? What experts can I turn to? What task-forces and committees should I appoint? And I like to know where the Spirit is leading. I like to have a worship bulletin. I don't like surprises. I like to plan ahead.

One of things I like most about the Presbyterian Church is that we love to study things thoroughly and do them decently and in order. I think this is a strength. But "you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows." There comes

a time when we need to stop trying to explain and start praying and worshiping and praising. There comes a time when we need to hoist our sails to catch the wind. What would that mean for us as individuals? What would that mean for us as a church to hoist our sails and catch the wind of the Spirit?

We don't know where the Wind of God will drive us. Five years ago this Sunday we worshiped for the last time in our old sanctuary. Who could have told us that Sunday morning where the Holy Spirit would lead us in the coming years. It was completely unplanned and we were completely unprepared for what happened. But the Spirit led. And if we made mistakes, the Spirit is powerful enough and gracious enough to redirect us. That goes for us as individuals too. We have no crystal ball telling us where the Spirit will lead us - but we trust that God's will for us is life and service and worship - God's purpose for us is to proclaim the unconditional love and leadership of Jesus Christ to the local and world community and trust the Holy Spirit to give us all a new birth.

Let us pray: Eternal God, help us to have the courage to attempt more than small cautious endeavors so that we can be in control. Give us your Spirit to attempt things that only you can do, to minister in ways that only Christ can minister, to speak to ourselves and to others in ways that only Christ can speak. Lord, keep us from reducing our prayer to a grocery list of our wants but enable us to praise and thank you for your grace to us in Jesus Christ and for your life giving Spirit. Give us minds and hearts and wills made new by your Holy Spirit. Come, Holy Spirit, touch our lips with burning coals from your holy altar in heaven; take our guilt away, forgive our sin and send us out to speak your word and serve you for Christ's sake. Amen.