

“The Wind Blows Where It Will”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
2nd Sunday of Lent
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Old Testament Reading: Genesis 12:1-4a

¹Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” ⁴So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.

New Testament Reading: John 3:1-17

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He 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.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus 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?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The 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.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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. ¹⁷“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.



Sermon: “The Wind Blows Where It Chooses...”

This story of Nicodemus coming to see Jesus in the middle of the night is a bit scandalous. I mean Urban-Myer-meeting-Jim-Harbaugh-to-discuss-which-khaki’s-Urban-should-wear-on-the-sideline scandalous.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee; which means that when Jesus pushed against the religious authorities and sought to reform the beliefs and practices of their shared Jewish tradition, he was putting himself at odds with people like Nicodemus. But here he is, under cover of darkness, coming to meet with Jesus.

Jesus talks to Nicodemus about rebirth. This story is where we get the term “Born Again” Christian. The old King James Bible translated it that way and it stuck. But modern scholarship and better understanding of Biblical Greek lead us to read Jesus’ words about rebirth as that Nicodemus must be born not “again,” but “from above.”

What’s the difference? “Born again” has always emphasized the believer’s action in claiming God. “Born from above” helps to put the emphasis back on God’s action in claiming us. It is God who saves, God who redeems.

Which makes sense when you consider that being born is not something you do. It is something that happens to you. When our oldest child was born, he arrived two weeks late. The doctor told us he just “wasn’t ready to come out, yet.” Which was cute in a colloquial sort of way, but in a more accurate, scientific way, it was false. We don’t *decide* to be born at the beginning of life and what Jesus is saying here is that we don’t decide to be born from above either. It is the work of the Holy Spirit and the work of the Holy Spirit is in large part a mystery to us.

I think that’s what Jesus means when he says that “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.”

In Greek, the word for “wind” and “Spirit” is the same word: “pneuma.” Like the wind, the Holy Spirit moves where it will and we are taken along for the ride.

When we are born from above, it is by the power of God’s Holy Spirit, and not by our own doing. Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians that we have been saved by grace through faith “and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”¹ Salvation is not about making a commitment to God or accepting God. Salvation is God’s work through the Holy Spirit

Rodger Nishioka, is a professor at Columbia Seminary and a friend of Mary and me. In his book *The Roots of Who We Are*, he tells an interesting story that gives an excellent example of the Presbyterian understanding of being born again. While speaking at a youth event outside Anchorage, Alaska, he got the opportunity to visit with the older couple who owned the camp where the event was being held.

During their conversation, the couple spoke of their experiences of being born again and asked Rodger when he had been born again. I’ll let Rodger pick up the story from there:

¹ Ephesians 2:8-9, NRSV

“I shared with them that growing up in a wonderful Christian home with God at the center, I could not recall a time in my life when I did not know that God made me, that Christ had died for me, and that the Holy Spirit was with me.

“‘The camp owners grew concerned and pressed. ‘But Rodger, when were you born again?’ Then I explained that if they wanted a particular day I guess I would say at age seventeen when I was baptized and confirmed. But by this time they were clearly upset. ‘Are you telling us you haven’t been born again?’ they asked incredulously.

“‘No,’ I replied. ‘In fact, I am telling you that I have made a commitment to Jesus Christ as my Lord and savior and have stood in front of my home congregation and said so. I believe truly that I am born again and again, moment by moment, by the grace of God.’”²

As Presbyterians we affirm that we are claimed by God long before we can ever lay claim to God ourselves. In Romans Paul writes “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son... and those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.”³

If there is one word people associate with Presbyterians, it’s “Predestination.” And most folks who do, seem to misunderstand that word to mean that everything that happens, from the rise and fall of empires, right down to what you had for breakfast this morning, was decided on by God eons ago and is all a part of God’s master plan; that everything we do or that happens to us is predetermined by God; and our whole lives are plotted out in advance. Which explains why the most popular Presbyterian joke seems to be “What did the Presbyterian minister say when he fell down the front steps of his church and broke his arm? ‘Whew! I’m sure glad *that’s* over with!’”

But the doctrine of predestination was actually developed as an answer to the question of salvation. When the reformation began and voices within the church started speaking against the buying and selling of indulgences, a practice by which people could purchase forgiveness of sins from the church, people began to ask the question “Well then, how then *are* we saved?” Thinkers like John Calvin answered with this idea of predestination, first developed by Paul, as the answer: It is not your own doing. Salvation is God’s doing.

The doctrine of predestination says nothing about the daily events of your life . It just says that God has claimed you long before you could ever claim God. Our salvation is in God’s hands, not our own. As Rodger said, “[We are] born again and again, moment by moment, by the grace of God.”

In other words, if we belong to God it is because God has claimed us long before we could ever lay claim on God. That is why we baptize infants in our tradition; not because they are making a

² Nishioka, Rodger Y. *The Roots of Who We Are*. Louisville, KY: Bridge Resources, 1997. 44. Print.

³ Romans 8:30, NRSV

profession of faith or a decision to follow Christ, but to symbolize with an outward act, an inward grace that is already present.

But the doctrine of salvation addresses our ultimate fate; what happens to us after we die. Christ was also concerned about our lives until then. And that's where our choices come in.

"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." That wind guides our daily living and we can choose to push against it or set our sails to ride wherever it takes us. As a survivor of several hurricanes over the course of a lifetime lived along the South Carolina coast, I can tell you that wind can be scary. Wind can lift the roof from a house or even destroy it completely. If you don't tie everything down, a good wind will blow everything away. Wind is unpredictable and disruptive and if we choose to set our sails to harness its power, there is no telling where we might wind up or how turbulent the ride will be. To make a decision for Christ then, is to open ourselves to the movement of that Spirit; to be led by the Spirit to where God would have us go, which can be dangerous and exhilarating and life-changing.

Abraham, in our first scripture reading, is a great example. I have always been intrigued by the brevity and wide open nature of God's call to Abraham. "The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you..."⁴ That's it. No directions. No specifics. Just go... and I'll tell you when to stop walking. For Abraham to actually set forth on that journey is a remarkable act of courage... and a remarkable act of faith. And that is largely what being a disciple is all about; having faith enough to let go and let God be in control.

When he preached on this same passage some 30 years ago, the great William Sloan Coffin noted that like the wind, the unfettered movement of the Spirit can take us to new and sometimes frightening places. Coffin wrote: You don't have to move out as Abraham, did, but you do have to move, as Nicodemus somehow could not, from the ranks of Jesus' admirers to the ranks of his followers... from the security of [the] known... to the joy of vulnerability, the joy of not being sure..."⁵

We don't control our salvation or whether or not God will love and watch over us. But we do control whether we will make a conscious decision to follow Jesus and to embrace the life of the disciple to which he calls us. In this season of Lent, we are invited to consider the ways in which we fail to put into action the things Christ taught; the ways that we trust in our own abilities and our own wisdom rather than in God's ability to lead us to where we are supposed to be.

We have come to depend on so much that is of our own making that it feels quite risky indeed to allow the free movement of the Holy Spirit to control our direction; to set our agenda and

⁴ Genesis 12:1, NRSV

⁵ Coffin, William Sloane. "Jesus and Nicodemus, March 15, 1987." *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: The Riverside Years, Volume 2*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008. 507-11. Print.

guide us on our journey. But that is precisely what it means to accept Christ as Lord; to let God's Holy Spirit rule within us; to ride the winds to where they will take us; and to enjoy the thrill of the journey.

I used to have an old friend back in South Carolina who, whenever the subject of God's will would come up, always quoted from a poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox:

One ship sails East, And another West,
By the self-same winds that blow,
'Tis the set of the sails And not the gales,
That tells the way we go.⁶

It is one thing to be one of Christ's admirers, but quite another to be one of his followers. Which will you be? In his season of Lent, let us raise our sails and let the wind take us where we need to be.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.

⁶ Wilcox, Ella Wheeler. "Tis The Set Of The Sail -- Or -- One Ship Sails East." *Poemhunter.com*. C. Ekrem Teymur, 2 Apr. 2010. Web. 17 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/tis-the-set-of-the-sail-or-one-ship-sails-east/>>.