

“Wind-Powered”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
Trinity Sunday
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First Scripture Lesson: 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; and Lot went with him.

Second Scripture Lesson: 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? ¹¹“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. 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: *Wind Powered.*

Every day we draw on a tremendous amount of power to fuel our lives. It all starts with our bodies. When I was a kid, I learned from Sesame Street that our bodies are like cars that need good fuel to be able to run. These days mine is powered largely by coffee and Mexican food. Our homes use a lot of electricity and gas to keep us warm in the winter and cool in the summer; to keep the ice cream cold and the coffee hot and to keep the internet and cable TV flowing all year long. We drive to work and run our errands and ferry our kids to school and practice in cars powered by gasoline or as is more often the case these days, electricity.

But what powers the church? What makes the church go? If you said gas and electric, you’d be wrong. Gas and electric power the building, but they do not power *the Church*. The Church is not a building or an institution. The Church is people, called together by God to love and serve God by loving and serving God’s

people. And the Church is powered by the presence of God's Holy Spirit, which means the Church is wind-powered.

In our second reading this morning, Jesus talks to Nicodemus about a rebirth of sorts. We are used to hearing this rebirth described as "being born again" which is often understood as something we choose to do. But we don't choose to be born. Here the Greek translates better as "you must be born from above." Jesus puts the emphasis on *God's* action. It is *God's* power and presence through the Holy Spirit that gives new life. Jesus 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." The emphasis here is on *God's* power and not our own.

Here Jesus is making an interesting play on words. The word "wind" in Greek is *pneuma* which also translates as "spirit." When Jesus talks about the wind blowing where it will, He is also talking about the Holy Spirit. Like the wind that blows where it will, the Holy Spirit will move and go wherever the Holy Spirit chooses. And like the wind, we cannot predict or control the Spirit. Which, if you think about it, is a little bit scary. Wind is powerful and unpredictable. Growing up in coastal South Carolina, I've experienced my fair share of hurricanes. But here in Ohio, tornadoes are pretty common. Of the two, I much prefer hurricanes. They're bigger, but they're slower and they give you more time to get out of the way.

But wind is also a gift. Throughout our history we have utilized the wind's power to move people and things by sailing ships and to generate power with wind mills. Windchimes make gentle music, and you can harness the power of wind to fly a kite or blow bubbles or transform a dandelion from a vile weed into an enchanting child's plaything. And when the sun burns down on a hot summer day, nothing feels sweeter and more grace-filled than a cool breeze.

But wind can also do curious, and sometimes amazing things. I saw a picture recently from the National Weather Service archives, of an unbroken vinyl record album that was found stuck in the side of telephone pole by a tornado.¹ Which is apparently the kind of thing tornado winds do. In 2016, the winds of an EF-3 tornado near Pampa, TX, drove a cornstalk through the radiator of a large truck, and lifted other cornstalks high into the atmosphere where they became coated with ice before falling back to earth as what one reporter referred to as "corn-hail."² A 2011 a tornado in Ringgold, GA leveled a local restaurant called the Chow Time Diner. Nothing was left standing by the winds except a part of the lunch counter, on top of which sat a glass cake dish, still intact, the cake inside undamaged.³

Wind is powerful and delightful and enchanting and weird. But when the wind blows, you basically have two choices: resist, or let it take you where it wants you to go. There's an old poem entitled "*'Tis the set of the Sail*" which goes in part:

*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.*⁴

The wind of the Spirit is always moving through our lives and we can choose to push against Her or set our sails to go wherever She takes us. And that can be a scary proposition because riding the wind means by definition, giving up control of where we are going.

Control is comforting. Giving away control is not. That's why we tend to like travelling in cars as opposed to say, hot air balloons. I read an article recently that was titled "How Do You Steer a Hot Air Balloon?"⁵ The first two words of the article were "You can't..." In a hot air balloon, you use a burner to heat air that makes the balloon go up. If you turn off the burner, the air cools and the balloon goes down. But that's about it for control. Everything else is up to the direction and strength of the wind.

Which is why we don't use balloons for travel so much. We like cars and airplanes and things that we can control. We like to be in charge. My first taste of freedom was when I turned 16 and got my driver's license. My parents would let me drive to youth group every Sunday night, but they never told me I had to go *straight* there. At 16, true freedom was getting behind the wheel of a car and going wherever my \$5 worth of gas could take me. But hot air balloons don't have steering wheels. You just have to go where the wind takes you.

And giving up control like that can be difficult, especially in the church.

Now in the church, one of our most challenging tasks is to try to discern the Holy Spirit and where we are being led. That challenge is compounded by our tradition and experience. We get used to travelling in one direction and it can be hard to accept that God might lead in another, new direction. Tradition is wonderful, and experience is valuable. But the problem with tradition and experience is that too often we let them set the agenda for what *must* come next. We *know* where we are going because we've been there before.

Knowing what comes next is comfortable. It may be boring, but it's also less stressful. And in the church especially, I have found that folks like to be able to depend on what comes next. Folks like to know that what we did last week and the week before, is what we will do next week and the week after that. But, being the church of Jesus Christ means being nimble and flexible enough to catch the wind of the Spirit and go where She takes us. Which can be so very difficult and so very counter-intuitive. Smart people say if you want to be secure, and happy, you need to have more power and more control, not less; especially in this country, at this time in history. But being led by the Spirit means being unsure of where the journey will take us, which takes courage and faith, because it is a little bit dangerous and exhilarating and life-changing. But that's what it is to trust God to take us where we need to be. That's what we've signed-up for.

Abraham knew all about that. As we found in our first scripture reading, when God called Abraham, it was with a shocking lack of detail. And Abraham responded with an equally amazing amount of trust. "The Lord said to [Abraham], 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you...'" That's it. No directions. No specifics. No landmarks. "Just go," says God ... "and I'll tell you when to stop walking." For Abraham to 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 28 years ago, 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... 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..."⁶

Where might God's Holy Spirit take us if we but let go and trust that God will lead us to where we need to be?

We (Overbrook Church) own a farm, but we don't really grow anything there. Might the Spirit be leading us to become a congregation of farmers, growing fresh food for communities in parts of the city considered "food deserts" that so desperately need it?

We have a restaurant grade kitchen right down stairs from where you're sitting right now, but we don't cook very much in it. Could the Spirit be guiding us to serve meals to our community?

We sit in one of the fastest growing cities in America? According to recent US Census Estimates, Columbus is the fourth fastest growing large city in America.⁷ Could the Spirit be leading us to go out of these doors to meet these new people who are coming here and invite them to church?

We have plenty of able-bodied people in this congregation and lots of mechanical and construction know-how. Could the Spirit be leading us to start a ministry of home repair and lawn work for the poor and the elderly and the disabled?

We have many medical professionals in this congregation. Could we start a medical mission to serve in this community or perhaps somewhere else in the world?

We sit right now on a piece of property that is valued at several million dollars. Could the Spirit be leading us to redevelop all or part of it into something that could fund our ministry or perhaps even into some new ministry like affordable housing? Or could the Spirit be leading us to sell it outright which would set us free from the financial burden of building maintenance and set us free as a congregation to do more and be more than ever before?

The possibilities are scary... but a little exhilarating too, no?

The Church is changing. Not just our little corner of it, the Church as a whole. But change is not new. God has always been doing a new thing in the world. The Bible is the story of God repeatedly shaking things up. God's covenant with Abraham, God calling Moses to lead the descendants of Abraham out of slavery in Egypt and into the promised land, the exile from that promised land and Israel's return to it; Jesus' challenges to the Roman Empire and the Jewish establishment, His life, death and resurrection; the birth of the Christian church.

And beyond scripture, God has continued to stir things up; the protestant reformation and any number of other reformations of the church that have taken place since; the change of church attitudes towards slavery and women and people of color and homosexuals; the church's involvement on the side of justice and equality for all God's children; all of these earth shaking seismic shifts have been the result of the Holy Spirit sweeping through this world, moving us, pushing us, guiding us, changing us.

And those changes have not always been comfortable, and they've almost always left us feeling uncertain and a little scared. But that's what it's like when you're wind-powered, and Spirit filled. Sometimes all you feel is a gentle breeze; an almost imperceptible nudge urging you forward. And sometimes the Spirit is a jet stream that spins you around and knocks you flat on your rear end!

But God's Holy Spirit; the presence of God moving in and through and amongst us, is the source of our life. The same Holy Spirit that changes the world also surrounds us, comforts us, sustains and nourishes us. Wherever there is wisdom and beauty and creativity, there is God's Holy Spirit. Wherever justice is done for the poor and the oppressed and the marginalized, there is God's Holy Spirit. Wherever human beings are joined together in community with God and one another; wherever there is love and mutually supportive relationship, there is the power and presence and movement of God's Holy Spirit.

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. As people of faith, it is our comfort and our challenge to let go of the wheel and to let the power of God's Holy Spirit take us to 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.

End Notes

¹ MessyNessy. "Fearless Photographs of the First Tornado Chasers." *Messy Nessy Cabinet of Chic Curiosities*, 12 May 2016, www.messynessychic.com/2016/04/28/fearless-photographs-of-the-first-tornado-chasers/.

² Erdman, Jon. "The Strangest Tornado Damage in the U.S." *The Weather Channel*, The Weather Channel, 30 Nov. 2017, weather.com/storms/tornado/news/strange-tornado-damage-photos.

³ Tornadoes Spawn Strange Tales, Some of Them True." *Timesfreepress.com*, Chattanooga (TN) Times Free Press, 26 Apr. 2012, www.timesfreepress.com/news/news/story/2012/apr/26/tornadoes-spawn-strange-tales-some-them-true/76469/.

⁴ Wilcox, Ella Wheeler. "Tis The Set Of The Sail -- Or -- One Ship Sails East." *Poemhunter.com*. C. Ekrem Teymur, 2 Apr. 2010. Web. 1 June 2015. <<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/tis-the-set-of-the-sail-or-one-ship-sails-east/>>.

⁵ Guildford, Bob. "How Do You Steer a Hot-air Balloon?" *LBC*. LBC Radio, n.d. Web. 01 June 2015. <<http://www.lbc.co.uk/how-do-you-steer-a-hot-air-balloon-47109>>.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Evans, Walker. "Census: Columbus Is the 4th Fastest-Growing Big City in the US." *ColumbusUnderground.com*, Walker & Anne Evans, 25 May 2018, 1:30 PM, www.columbusunderground.com/census-columbus-is-the-4th-fastest-growing-big-city-in-the-us-we1.