

March 5, 2023
Genesis 12:1-4
John 3:1-17

The Wind Blows Where It Chooses

They say in Hollywood that you shouldn't work with children or animals. They are too unpredictable. Too spontaneous and too hard to control. They tend to do whatever they want, whenever they want. They go off script and do their own thing. The same could be said for children and baptism. Anything could happen. There might be yelling. Or crying. Or running around or squealing or stone-faced terror. We just don't know what will happen. But how much more wonderful does that make baptism time? How much more delightful is it when we bring together two really unpredictable things, our children and our Holy Spirit?

God's Spirit is like a child. Spontaneous. Creative. Joyful. It loves to play. It channels big emotions. It is always curious, always questioning. Always wondering. It is always on the move. Jesus says that the Spirit comes and goes as it will. It is here, there, and everywhere, Jesus says, blowing wherever it pleases. And, like the wind, you don't know where it came from or where it will end up. Because the Spirit is the Spirit. It doesn't stop or stay still. It ebbs and flows and moves. Circulating, like

our breath. In and out. In, out. Inhale, exhale. Always in motion. And if it did stop, if our breath stopped, we wouldn't be alive anymore.

The Spirit is like breath. It moves and blows wherever it will. We don't know where it comes from or where it is going. And it is a mystery.

That's what Jesus tells Nicodemus today in our scripture reading.

Nicodemus, a religious teacher, is curious. He wonders about Jesus, and he has come looking for answers. Jesus has been doing amazing things, wonderful things. Things you couldn't do without the Spirit of God.

There is something about Jesus. The air around him is different. The atmosphere is charged with possibility. Nicodemus felt it. And maybe you have felt something like that too. That something powerful is happening. Something beyond your control. It reassures you and comforts you and you just know God is there. A presence. An energy. I felt it on a loading dock at a church camp. A friend felt it in a hospital room with her grandmother. Another felt it at a worship service speaking in tongues. Maybe you have felt something like. And you don't know where it came from or where it went. All you know is that it was real.

Nicodemus felt that feeling with Jesus. He felt a presence that he had never felt before, even though he knew God and he was a teacher of the law. He felt a hope beyond hope. A life beyond life. And it was powerful. It could overcome any boundary or barrier. Nicodemus sensed it with Jesus and he knew that it was a God thing. But still, he wasn't sure. He couldn't believe what his heart told him. Because this wasn't what was supposed to happen. This wasn't what he had been taught. It was too wild, too different, too unpredictable.

We, humans don't like unpredictable. We like predictable. We like knowing where things come from and where they are going. We might suddenly try a new restaurant or watch a new like of movie. But mostly we don't. We like things the way we like them. I too like having things be predictable. A few weeks ago, the Kroger in Versailles moved things around and it gave me a very bad day. I had to find things, even though I knew where they were supposed to be. Worst of all, they had moved the clearance shelf. I love the clearance shelf. I was not emotionally prepared for the clearance shelf to be somewhere else. I had to change my whole route through the store. It was exhausting.

I like things the same. Maybe you do too. Maybe you feel agitated that the world is changing. Our culture is changing. Language is changing. Ideas are changing. Everything around us seems different than it used to be. We couldn't have predicted this. Everything is blowing around, here and there and everywhere. And we don't know where these new things come from or where they will end up. Like that wind on Friday. It's a blustery day. And beliefs and thoughts and assumptions are flying everywhere. Nothing stays put.

Like Nicodemus, we go to Jesus for some reassurance and comfort. Because Jesus seems to know a thing or two about God. But Jesus is not so comforting. He says that this is the way it is. God's Spirit moves around. It doesn't stay still. It goes from one place to another. Just like Jesus. From one town to another. From one side to another. From the rich to the poor. From the Jew to the Gentile. From men to women, and Samaritan to Sadducees and back again. Jesus goes wherever he feels the Spirit leading him. He is circulating like air, moving like breath. Like the wind blowing where it chooses. No one knows where it comes from or where it goes. The Spirit can't be controlled or contained or closeted.

It goes where it pleases and visits who it pleases. And who are we to hinder the Lord? Like the wind, we cannot stop it. And we cannot tell it what to do.

The word for spirit and wind are the same in Greek, the language of the New Testament. That word is *pneuma*. It's where we get our words *pneumonia* and *pneumatic*; words having to do with air. The word is fluid and flexible just like the movement of air it implies. It is a force of wind invisible to us, and yet felt and known. Seen and unseen, tangible and intangible. But it's there, but we don't know where it comes from or where it's going. The same word in Hebrew is *ruach*. It also means wind, Spirit, or breath. The *ruach* of God, the breath of God is what was there in the beginning, blowing over the face of the deep. The Spirit is what God breathed into us to give us life.

The Spirit moves, Jesus says. It travels. It never stays still. It goes from one place to another, going where it wishes. Never asking OUR permission. Never playing by OUR rules. Never being confined to OUR expectations. It stirs us up when we get stale. It fills us when we get flat. It inspires us to take a deep breath and a leap of faith, to trust that God's

love keeps expanding and expanding. Going places we would rather not go. Yet if you are born of the Spirit, you know the Spirit. You understand you cannot predict it or prevent it from going where it will. That's what Abram discovers in our story from Genesis. His family was on the move from Ur. They stopped in Haran where Abram's father died. Then God says to Abram, "OK, time to go again. Keep moving. Leave your country, your kindred and your father's house. You are going to a land that I will show you. There I will bless you and I will make you a great nation. There, you will be a blessing to all the families of the earth." But not in the place Abram is. He has to move. He has to go to a new place, a place he's never seen before with only God to guide him.

That's the kind of faith we need now. The faith to trust God. The faith to believe God is leading us somewhere good. The faith to go with the flow and move with the Spirit and leave everything from our father's house behind. To accept that we don't know where we are going or what will happen on the way. But we do know God's love. And the promise will end in blessing for all the families of the earth.

What if we allowed ourselves to trust like that? What if we let the Spirit of God take us wherever it chose to? What if we allowed ourselves to feel the push and pull of God, the movement of the Spirit, the circulating breath of life? What if we let ourselves be carried away in the play and imagination? Unencumbered by fear? Free from what others might think or what the world might condemn? What if we were light enough to go wherever God would carry us? Trusting that wherever we end up, we would find life beyond life. Hope beyond hope. Grace upon grace. The love that keeps going and going and going until it reaches all the families of the earth?

Abram trusted that Spirit. He believed God was leading him, and that God would provide for him wherever he went. He would find there was more to God than he had known before. That God would turn out to be bigger than he imagined. That there would be more love and more goodness and more family out there to be had.

Abram leaves what he knows behind and goes with the flow. He follows the Spirit. And it keeps him moving. And it keeps us moving too. It calls us to life that is unpredictable and unknowable. Life beyond fear. Life

beyond ourselves. Life beyond life. And it will not stop and it will not rest until all the families of the earth are blessed. This is the Spirit that is now in you, Jay and Maci. The Spirit we share when we gather at this table. The Spirit that will keep moving us and keep pushing us until we get that we are loved beyond measure. Love is where we have come from and where we are going. Love is all there is. It is the energy, the wind, the breath, the air, the very Spirit of God.

Today, as we remember our breath, I ask you to close your eyes and place your hand on your heart. Observe your breath, without trying to change it or judge it. Just let it come and go. Notice it moving in and out, circulating at its own pace. Notice how it expands your chest and lifts your hand and then how it leaves, and your hand is drawn back to your heart. Notice how all of this happens without you making it happen. Notice the breath circulating and the cycle continuing. Think of the Spirit, the wind, the breath of God circulating in you. Think of it circulating in the world. As you breathe think of how the breath of God circulates in creation. How it is part of the lives of those next to you. Those in our community. All people everywhere. Those who are so

different, so other. The breath is moving in them. This breath, the Spirit of God goes where it will. It is unstoppable. It is uncontrollable. It keeps moving and moving and moving. Because God so loves the world.

Because of love, God gave us breath and Spirit. God gave us life beyond life. A family and a home and place to belong. Please join with me in prayer...