

John 3:1-17

BLOWN AROUND BY THE SPIRIT

There is a fable about a motherless tiger cub who was adopted by goats and brought up by them to speak their language, emulate their ways, eat their food, and in general to believe that he was a goat himself. Then one day a king tiger came along, and when all the goats scattered in fear, the young tiger was left alone to confront him, afraid and yet somehow not afraid. The king tiger asked him what he meant by his unseemly masquerade, but all that the young one could do in response was to bleat nervously and continue nibbling at the grass. So the tiger carried the cub to a pool where he forced him to look at their two reflections side by side and draw his own conclusions. When this failed, the king tiger offered the cub his first piece of raw meat. At first the young tiger recoiled from the unfamiliar taste of it, but then as he ate more and began to feel it warming his blood, the truth gradually became clear to him. Lashing his tail and digging his claws into the ground, the young beast finally raised his head high, and the jungle trembled at the sound of his exultant roar. (Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, pg. 90)

As I read the Gospel lesson, I wonder if there were something stirring within Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews. He was part of the religious establishment and he had it made in terms of status, respect, authority, and economic security. However, I imagine that there was a feeling of restlessness within him. Nicodemus, I think, yearned for something more. He was here, but he wanted to be over there. He knew there was something substantial missing in his life.

So, Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. John may mean that Nicodemus came under the cover of darkness so that no one would see him and recognize him talking with this unconventional rabbi. It is also likely that John used the word night on purpose for he employs the light and darkness motif throughout his gospel. The darkness symbolizes a lost age or one who stumbles because he or she is out of touch with God's light (especially as the light is revealed in Jesus the Son). In other words, Nicodemus' nocturnal visit is a way of saying that he just doesn't get it!

Nicodemus acknowledged that Jesus came from God, otherwise he couldn't do the signs, perform the miracles, for which he was known. Jesus discouraged those who focused solely on his miraculous signs. Instead, he wanted people to go deeper, below the surface of life, and experience God in a more profound relationship rather than simply following the rules and observing the traditions of the Jewish religion.

Thus, Jesus challenged Nicodemus' way of thinking by telling him, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus thought Jesus meant that someone had to be physically born again and wondered aloud how it was even possible to enter into the mother's womb and go through birth a second time. Whether the Greek word is translated as born again, born from above, or born anew, it really doesn't matter because the meaning is still the same. Our physical birth was something that was done for us rather than by us. It's not about what we did; after all, we cannot give birth to ourselves. Likewise, to be born from above comes from God; it's not something we achieve. It's all a gift; it's God's grace breathing new life into us so that we are able to say, "Yes!" to God and enter into God's kingdom.

Jesus reiterated the point by stating we must be born of water and Spirit. This is a reference to the Sacrament of Baptism. Baptism – whether Evan's or Emma's baptism, your baptism or mine, is something that is done to us and for us. It's the sign of salvation that assures

us and proclaims to the world that we belong to God in life, and death, and forever. This aliveness that Nicodemus was searching for is freely offered to us. It's given to us as a gift so that we might enter into an ever deepening relationship with the Lord God throughout our lives.

Furthermore, just as we cannot control the wind, which blows wherever it wants to but isn't confined by our knowing where it comes from or where it is going, so also, the Spirit moves in much the same way. We cannot capture or control God's Spirit. We don't know the Spirit's origin, and we don't know its destination. But, like the wind, God's Spirit will blow us around and move us off of our carefully chartered course in order to accomplish God's purpose in the world. If we give in to the Spirit, we will receive so much more.

Just this past week, one of my former members (from my church thirty miles north of Dallas) called me and, in the midst of catching up, she expressed how much she and others missed the Stevens. I told her that I had always assumed we would remain in that corridor between Texas and Missouri. I never envisioned that we would come here to Virginia. However, Monica and I really felt that God was leading us here, and we tried to be faithful to that sense of call. We will always be grateful for the years we were privileged to live and serve in Texas, but, after being blown around by the Spirit and landing first in Richmond and now here, we are equally grateful for God's plan that brought us to this Commonwealth and to this fellowship.

Nicodemus still didn't get the gist of what Jesus was saying so Jesus reminded him of how Moses had lifted up the image of a bronze serpent on a pole out in the wilderness. The Israelites had complained of the lack of food and water, and thus, had been bitten by serpents; but, if they gazed upon the elevated serpent, they lived. Likewise, Jesus would be lifted up – not just upon the cross but also raised up from death and would ascend into heaven. And all, who look at him and believe in him will have eternal life, the fullest life possible, now and in the life to come. All that Jesus said and described was God's gift freely given to all – why? – because God loves the world and that's why God gave the Son. It's not God's intention to condemn but to save the world.

That's the end of this story but it's not the end of Nicodemus. While he may not have grasped all that Jesus was telling him that night, some of it began to take root in his life. The Spirit of God began to blow through him and moved him around so that he wasn't the same person bound by the same old way of doing things. We meet up with Nicodemus in John 7 as he tried to restrain his fellow Pharisees in their attempt to silence Jesus. Then, in John 19, after Jesus' crucifixion, Nicodemus went with Joseph of Arimathea to see Pilate to ask for Jesus' body in order to bury him; and Nicodemus came with myrrh and aloes to anoint Jesus' body. While we don't know exactly what became of Nicodemus, I am willing to bet that this seeker in the night, by the power of the Holy Spirit, became a follower of the light. I don't doubt that God breathed new life into Nicodemus and gave birth to him a second time, a spiritual renewal from above,

As those who have believed in Jesus Christ and have received eternal life – right now as well as beyond the grave – we acknowledge that God's grace is a gift; it's not something we can earn by good works or achieve through any effort on our parts.

At the same time, as Christian disciples, we are intended to grow more and more into the likeness of the One, whom we call Lord. Once again, we don't do this on our own. Rather, God gives to us yet again. The Holy Spirit is poured into our lives at baptism and resides within us, stirring us up, moving us around, and taking us places we never considered. This wild yet wonderful Spirit breathes new life into us and pushes us beyond our comfort zones – taking us to

places and peoples not on our agenda – but certainly within God’s plan. God sends us and uses us to share Christ-like compassion because God really does love this world and every one in it, and God doesn’t want to condemn but to save so that all might taste of life eternal.

Throughout our lives, God’s Spirit continues to guide, nurture, protect, prod us and put us to work for the sake of God’s kingdom here on earth. There are many, many illustrations of people, Christian disciples, being blown around by the Spirit into places they would never have dreamed of going. Here are but a few examples:

John Newton, who had once been a slave trader, finally heard the Good News of the Gospel and the Spirit blew him off his earlier course, spun him around, and he embarked on the Christian journey during which time – in 1779 – he penned the words to the beloved hymn, Amazing Grace. Near the end of his life, he spoke these words to a fellow minister: “I am not what I ought to be! How imperfect and deficient I am! I am not what I wish to be, although I abhor that which is evil and would cleave to that which is good! I am not what I hope to be, but soon I shall put off mortality, and with it all sin and imperfection. Though I am not what I ought to be, nor what I wish to be, nor yet what I hope to be, I can truly say I am not what I once was – a slave to sin... I can heartily acknowledge that by the grace of God I am what I am!

Dr. Albert C. Winn, who is a Presbyterian minister and retired seminary president, wrote: “When my children were small, I was writing a dissertation on the Holy Spirit. You can imagine my difficulties when four little people kept asking, ‘Daddy, what is the Holy Spirit?’ We were living in Alabama, in the fifties and sixties, and a great riot broke out in our town, protesting the integration of the University of Alabama. Our pastor was a very shy, retiring man. But that Sunday when he entered the pulpit there was something different about him. With a power that none of us had ever seen before, he laid his job on the line – indeed, his life on the line – to tell us clearly and unmistakably that every single human being, regardless of color, is precious in the sight of God. There was a great stillness. In the car on the way home I said quietly, ‘Now I think you know what the Holy Spirit is.’ And all four children nodded. (A Christian Primer, p. 157)

In a small town, a church sponsored the re-settlement of some Indo-Chinese refugees. One man in the congregation – I’ll call him Stew, though that wasn’t his name – was just totally opposed to this resettlement. Stew didn’t understand, appreciate or accept the fact that these foreigners of another race were brought into the community and into his church. One Sunday morning, the congregation was having communion. In that church, people came up front to the kneeling rail. The pastor started the bread and the cup from one end and the worshippers passed the elements to their neighbor. As it so happened (or was it of the Spirit’s prompting?), when the people came to the rail and spread out, Stew and the head of the Laotian family were side by side, kneeling at the rail. According to the pastor, “In the ancient ritual of the church, Stew took the bread and turned to the man whom he had never wanted as a part of his congregation or community and said, ‘This is my body which is broken for you,’ and the wind of the Spirit swept so powerfully through that place the foundation shook. It was a transforming experience of the power of Christ in life.” (Carl L. Schenck, *Lectionary Homiletics*, 2/99, p. 31)

May God’s Spirit blow new life into us and blow us around so that we end up exactly where God needs us in order to serve, love, and fulfill God’s purposes through us. As disciples of Jesus, let us move (or be moved by the Spirit) so that we go far beyond simply observing our religion to entering into a deeper and more fulfilling relationship with the Lord and all of God’s children. May the Spirit come, fresh and new, and sweep us off our feet and blow us away from what is comfortable and help us to take risks such as turning the other cheek, taking up the cross,

finding life by losing it, forgiving over and over again, and so on. When we live like that, then we will truly know that we have eternal life – by the grace of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA
March 20, 2011