

Gary Bagley
Hilton Presbyterian Church
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Water, Wind, and Fire
Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3 15-17, 21-22
John 3:1-8

Today's gospel reading contains the story of John baptizing Jesus. John's baptism was a repentance baptism—a symbol of a person desiring to be inwardly clean and holy. John says to those around him, "I baptize with water...but he [referring to Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

Baptism is a symbol for a new way of thinking and living for adults who come to faith through Christ; it is a symbol of the "grafting" of infants and children into the life of a congregation when member-parents desire for their children to come under the guidance and blessing of the Christian faith. There is no magic about the water. It is a symbol to remind us that *anyone in Christ is a new creation. The old life has gone; a new life has begun.*

Luke's story of John baptizing Jesus is illuminated in a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in the gospel of John (John 3:1-8). "I baptize with water," John said, "but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire"—three of the five classical elements (water, wind, fire, earth, and space).

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus (a Jewish leader and member of the Sanhedrin) illuminates this understanding of the life-giving nature Christ has on a person. Jesus told this earnest leader of people, "...no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born from above." More questions ensued, then Jesus used the analogy of the Spirit of God being like the wind.

This was a most natural comparison to any first-century Jew. The Hebrew word, *rauch*, was used for life-giving breath of all mammals. It was used to describe the primal force that raced and tore across the desert. It was also the Hebrew word in Genesis to describe the presence of the Spirit of God moving across the face of the earth.

Here was Jesus and Nicodemus on the Mount of Olives talking in the darkness of night about the mystery of God. To a teacher of the Rabbinical Law, Jesus was talking about the work of God in the life of an individual—how God

could take a life that was conscious of emptiness, disappointment, failure, and sin and transform it into a life of fullness, energy, and healthiness. Yet, Nicodemus, theologian that he was, did not understand.

“Listen to the wind, Nicodemus! Listen to the wind! The Spirit of God is just like that—invisible, yet unmistakable...untouchable, yet full of power...able to do wonderful things for you and all others if only you will turn your face to it and open your life to its influence.”

What was John the Baptist saying to his followers, and what was Jesus saying to Nicodemus about being baptized in God’s spirit and being born from “above?”

The wind blows... It is a simple statement of fact. Never has there been a time when the Spirit of God has not been active. Jewish writers sought to describe their inspiration of creation by depicting the Spirit of God moving across the waters of the earth. The writers of the New Testament history of the early church describe the experience of Pentecost. The Spirit of God moved through the large crowd, transforming their ability to communicate through the barriers of foreign languages and so “setting on fire” with a spiritual zeal all present. The early church began exploding with energy and growth.

There have always been times when people have cried out that God has deserted them...deserted the world. The Psalms are full of such laments.

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God...my tears have been my food day and night...Why have you forgotten me... (Psalm 42)

To all of us Jesus would say, “Listen to the wind! Feel the spiritual energy of the wind in your face!

Jesus metaphor continues to teach us: *The wind blows where it chooses...* There’s an old saying: “You can hang him on a cross, but you can’t nail him down.” If the first affirmation is that the Spirit of God is always active, the second affirmation has to do with the freedom of God. You can never fully define God, never hem God up, never possess God, never fully speak for God. Just when we think we really understand God, we are swept off our feet with a new understanding that leaves us humbled and struggling to regain our spiritual equilibrium. I’m always leery of people who know “too much” about God and have few or no doubts.

The wind blows, not where we timidly or dogmatically demand that it should. The wind blows where it chooses. Don't try to tame it; don't try to claim it. No group, sect, movement, or nation can lay claim to being the sole "owners" or interpreters of God. This is the very essence of our faith—the mystery that we live with.

Jesus said, *the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it.* When the wind is blowing, you don't need a lesson in atmospheric dynamics to recognize its presence. You feel it. You know it. You recognize it without thought. So it is with the work of God's spirit. When the Spirit stirs up a church, an individual, or a nation you don't need someone to tell you that something has happened.

Community service and mission projects have a way of jumping over beliefs and church doctrine to unite people behind a cause of love and concern. Thursday morning, I had a conversation in my office with a representative of the Virginia Council of Churches looking for a congregation who would sponsor a refugee couple from Iraq for their first three months of living in the United States. They arrive in Newport News on February. To do this, we will have to move quickly. The Missions Committee and Session will need to provide their input, blessing, and support. It would be a short term project, needing the support of a number of you.

When a person who is weak and undisciplined is made strong, when a church becomes focused and passionate, when a nation gets serious about issues of justice, kindness, and walking humbly with their God, when the way of Jesus is seen in family and business relations, when people of God throughout the world focus on what they hold in common—*then* the world is conscious that something vital is going on.

The wind blows where it chooses and you can hear the sound of it... If you have heard it and if you have seen its results, then you know that it is the unmistakable Spirit of that which is beyond us all.

Finally, Jesus' metaphor tells us that *we can hear the sound of the wind, but we don't know where it comes from and we don't know where it is going.*

There is a certain mystery about wind and breath. As Diane Ackerman says in *A Natural History of the Senses*, when we inhale—when we breath

inwardly—that breath goes into our lungs, is converted into oxygen and then moves through every cell of our body by the flow of blood.¹ Our lives literally take on everything around us and in some ways are forever changed by the air around and within us.

Nicodemus wanted to fully understand what Jesus was about and why his way was so powerful. He had obviously seen it and felt it as Jesus taught and made decisions. He had obviously seen the movement of energy and compassion in the people who were following Jesus. He wanted to fully understand it. Jesus was saying, “You can’t, Nicodemus. You never will be able to fully understand or explain it. You need to stop explaining and worship. You need to stop arguing and adore. You need to face the wind and feel its creative force on your life and go with it.” This is the appeal of Jesus and the challenge of worship.

Jesus also warns us through this image that we have no idea where the Spirit of God will take us. *You don’t know where it comes from and you don’t know where it goes.* Would Nicodemus have ever guessed that his conversation with Jesus would ultimately take him to the Pontius Pilate’s council chambers? Or, would he have ever imagined being among the ones to take the body of Jesus from the cross, anoint his body with the burial oils and wrap it with cloth before placing it in a tomb?

The Spirit of God comes upon John Wesley, a missionary from England to America in the province we now know as the state of Georgia. He returned home quite disillusioned, questioning faith and God. He discovered the Spirit’s power in a gathering at Aldersgate Street that set his life on a new course. The whole of the western world felt its impact.

The Spirit of God fell on John Newton, captain of a slave-trading ship, driving him to leave his captain’s position and become a minister of Christ’s church. From him came the hymn “Amazing Grace” as a reflection of his personal encounter with the wind of the Spirit.

On Friday of this week, our nation will celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, one of four federal holidays to commemorate an individual person. Dr. King was carried by the Spirit of God, as was Rosa Parks, Pope John Paul II,

¹ Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (Vintage, 1991),

Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, and countless other lesser-known individuals—all to change the world in ways for the better. In addition to the new directions the world will be taken in, no one knows what God may yet make of your life and character. The one thing we all should guard against is saying, “I’m not going to change; my patterns are too set; it is too late for any newness in my life. As on this night of the Nicodemus conversation, every day holds the prospect of the drab, suffocating, poisonous atmosphere vanishing as a result of God’s refreshing grace.

The natural elements of water, wind, and fire can be dangerous. But, in the hands of God they can drive us to new levels of living.

Isaiah said:

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*

Prayer

Loving Lord, Spirit of Holiness, take the desires of our heart and make of us new people. Open our eyes and give courage to our hesitations so that we fail not others nor You. In the spirit of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

15As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

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."

Isaiah 43:1-7

1But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

2When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.

3For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

4Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,

I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.

5Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;

6I will say to the north, "Give them up,"
and to the south, "Do not withhold;

bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth —

7everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.

Children's Sermon

John 3: 1-8 *The Spiritual Energy of Wind*

Children's sermon: bring a kite/string and tell the kids "Today we are going to fly a kite. I'll need your help"

Not much breeze in here.....we'll all have to blow really hard.

Get the congregation to help out...

Won't work? Why?

No wind. Kites fly with the wind and you have to catch the wind whenever it comes. You have to be ready. Take advantage of it.

God's spirit in our lives is like the wind--you don't always know when to expect it, but when you feel it, you must take advantage of it.