

The Answer Is Blowing in the Wind

John 3:1-17

June 7, 2009

We often note how many of the people who hung around Jesus were people like us – just ordinarily common folk. Today we deal with a guy who doesn't quite fit that mold. Nicodemus was a man of influence – an insider if you will. He was a Pharisee – a theological VIP. He knew what was happening around Jerusalem and the synagogue. He was a mover and a shaker. And he went late one night to visit the traveling itinerant preacher Jesus.

I'm not going to spend any time this morning rehashing the various reasons Bible scholars have determined might have been why Nicodemus went to visit Jesus in the middle of the night. Suffice it to say, there are sermons galore that could be and have been preached on those topics alone. Whatever the reason was, this much we can be sure of – it wasn't to engage in small talk. Despite the fact that is how Nicodemus began the conversation, it didn't take long for Jesus to move it to a deeper level.

Jesus basically told Nicodemus that he wasn't going to find relief for what was bothering him, concerning him, by some new set of rules – that it was going to take being born from above. True, the Hebrew words for “again” and “from above” sound a lot alike. True, they might have been whispering to one another. True, these might be explanations for why Nicodemus acted so shocked and confused by what Jesus said and essentially asked: “Are you saying that I've got to crawl back into my mommy's belly?”¹

Jesus immediately corrected Nicodemus' faulty query and repeated his reference to the need to be born from above trusting that this learned Pharisee would recall what he had been taught about the prophetic references offered by Ezekiel and other prophets concerning the need for a new heart, a new spirit. I find it so interesting the way some of our faith choose to reference Nicodemus' misunderstanding as the litmus test for whether someone's truly on the journey with Jesus or not. One preacher observed: “Sometimes I wonder if these folks feel like, since Jesus said in this very passage that he didn't come to condemn the world, God must have appointed them to do it!”²

The fact that Jesus responded to Nicodemus' questions suggests to me that he wasn't concerned about what motivated Nicodemus' questions – that he wasn't the least bit disturbed by them. Rather, his primary interest was to make understandable this central teaching that guided his ministry. Basically, he was saying to Nicodemus, “Nick, this new birth, this entering the Kingdom of God, happens when you are born of water *and the spirit*. Your physical birth came by your mother, flesh like you giving physical birth to you. Your spiritual birth comes by the Spirit.”

And then he created this mental picture with a little play on words made possible by the Greek language. The Greek word for spirit and wind is the same word. In effect he said to Nicodemus, “You can hear and see and feel the wind; but you do not know where the wind comes from and where it is going. You may not understand how and why the wind blows; but you can see what the wind does. It's the same way with the spirit and those who are born from above by the Spirit.” Another preacher put it this way: “Don't be afraid stupid. Instead, listen to the wind (which blows where it wants to ... when it wants to ... to the degree that it wants to ... for as long as it wants to). You can't control it. You just receive it. You move with it. You go with it.”³

I will never forget my first encounter with an approaching hurricane. It was 1985 and we were camping at Myrtle Beach State Park. We had a tent top type camper – a Coleman Minuteman. My parents were camping with us in their motor home.

Early one morning my dad and my son and I got up early to go fishing – they because they loved to fish anywhere, anytime; I, because I liked to fish at the ocean and wanted to spend the day with them. We went fishing off one of those long piers that populate the coastal areas.

Our first hint should have been that no one else was on the pier. We just assumed that we were more enthusiastic than the others. The weather was terrible. The wind was blowing so hard we could only throw our lines off one side of the pier. And the waves, well, the waves were higher than anything we'd ever seen. We were novice ocean fishermen. We just thought that was part of the thrill of fishing off a pier.

After a couple of hours of not catching anything, I walked back down the pier to the bait house to use the facilities. It was then I noticed several folks in the bait house crowded around this little 9" television watching and listening rather intently to the weatherman describe the situation. I began to catch phrases in their conversation: "Hurricane Bob," "looks like the eye is going to hit pretty close to Myrtle Beach," "should hit land overnight tonight," "rumor has it we're going to have to evacuate."

Now, there's a lot more to the story that would only make my dad and me look bad and stupid and reveal which was which. The wind we encountered later that night, after leisurely packing up and eating at one more restaurant, the wind and rain was one kind of wind to be sure. Even greater than the "high wind warning" and resultant experience we had last fall.

Now, those of us who golf a little, or a lot, all have seen that golfer far better than me, bend over and pick up a few blades of grass and throw them into the air so as to discern which way the ever so gentle wind was blowing. That's another kind of wind.⁴

Some of us fondly remember the line in Bob Dylan's popular folk song that proclaimed *the answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind*. Dylan asked numerous questions in the song that reflected age-old questions and questions people were asking about social issues of that day: "How many roads must a man walk down before they call him a man?" "How many times must cannonballs fly before they're forever banned?" "How many years must some mountains exist before they are swept to the sea?" "How many times can a man turn his head and pretend that he just doesn't see?" And each verse was followed with the almost philosophical and for sure one of the more thought-provoking truths of all time: "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind, the answer is blowin' in the wind."

It's how the spirit works – like the wind – entering us with it's answers – it's suggestions – it's influence from where we do not know – often from unexpected sources and at unexpected times.

There simply are those times when we know – just know – that the Spirit of God is speaking to us, is working inside our hearts and minds and souls. There are those times when we sense something happening from beyond ourselves and yet, within us, causing us to think new thoughts, to make new affirmations, to allow new decisions to take form within us.

Don't miss the point of there being different kinds of winds folks. There is not just one way this being born of the Spirit – from above – happens. For some of us it truly does happen suddenly – the moment can be named it was so powerful or insightful or meaningful. But, for others of us there was no one night – no one dramatic moment – no spiritual rush – just this gentle push here and a little nudge there – but a movement in a direction you never dreamed of going, a leading you to do something you never thought you'd do.⁵

Another way to ponder the way the spirit moves into our lives is to think about the way love moves into our lives – you know, when you first became aware that someone else loves you and cares for you or you love them or care for them. Some of us can name the exact moment – where you were – what restaurant you were eating at – what movie you were watching – what the other was wearing.

Others of us can't pinpoint a moment at all. For us, it was just this experience here and another one over here and a deepening and gradual awareness that there might be something between us and this other.

While it's tempting to tell our whole story, the Reader's Digest version will do for this morning. We were acquaintances for a year – had some of the same college friends, were from the same county, were both math majors, were with each other often when others were around – but that was it – we were just friends. And then one of the friends we had in common came to visit one of us during the summer and there was a night of dancing and a long walk to the bridge on West Main Street in Ottawa. One of us at least began to think, “Hummmh? I wonder if this could go somewhere?” It took the other several more times together. At any rate, the point is, sooner or later we responded to something happening, growing between us – just at different times.

The answer is blowin' in the wind – the spirit moves into our lives like the wind – like love – and has its way with us. Sometimes these moments have come for me when I have been in worship on a Sunday morning – sometimes they have come to me while I've been privately meditating – sometimes when I've been traveling in the car from one hospital to another or from one appointment to another – sometimes it has happened to me while I've been listening to a song on the radio – sometime when I've been sitting on the beach or up on a mountain – sometimes I've sensed God's spirit in the voice of a child – sometimes when I've heard a friendly hello – sometimes I have sensed it in tears of sorrow and sometimes when there's so much joy in the room the event seems bigger than life, like when a baby is born.

God's spirit moves in this world like the wind – like love. We can't see it moving, but we can feel it, we can sense it and we can see the results of its presence. We never know when the spirit is going to blow into our lives but we do know that the potential for it to influence us is present at all times and in all places.

Yes, “the answer, my friends, is blowin' in the wind.” The Holy Spirit is among us. It is with us every moment of our lives. That should be a comforting thought – not a scary one. Sense it in you – sense it renewing you – sense it filling you with hope and love and peace and joy – sense it birthing you again – from above – be open to it and it will happen.

1. William A. Ritter, “Gales, Breezes and Lots of Hot Air,” Collected Sermons (ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2005 via www.esermons.com) 0-000-2005.
2. Johnny Dean, “The More I Understand, the Less I Know,” www.esermons.com, 06/02/09, 1998.
3. “Gales, Breezes and Lots of Hot Air.”
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.

Prayer: O Lord, how we need to sense the wind within us today. How we need to be born from above – to have our outlook on our lives and the world transformed – to be brought into a closer relationship with you. Breathe, O Lord, that the wind upon which the Spirit travels might enter our lives. Let your Spirit blow free and strong within us. Let the mystery of your Spirit blow like the wind through our hearts and souls. Let it blow a word of understanding that will enlarge our vision of your call on our lives. Let it blow a word of peace to calm our fears. Let it blow a word of hope to give us courage. Let it blow a word of love to give us joy. In Jesus Christ's name we pray. Amen.