

“Wind Power”

John 3: 1-8

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GR FUMC

Some of us here can remember the day when gas pumps had room on their displays for only two digits above “0.” When the price of gasoline finally rose above \$.99/gallon, gas stations rushed to install new pumps. In the interval, the pump read “.01 or .02” and notes taped on to the front of the pump explaining that you were to add one dollar per gallon to the final amount.

Oh for the good old days! As gas prices hover around \$3/gallon and economists warn us that they’re not going anywhere but up, we Americans are feeling the pinch in our pocketbooks. As climate change roars ahead even faster than scientists had predicted due to our use of those ever-more expensive fossil fuels, we are beginning to look seriously for alternative sources of energy. Bio-fuel is big these days; even nuclear power, once seen as dangerous and toxic, is being reconsidered as an environmentally-friendly option. Wind power is also getting a lot of press as a solution to our energy woes.

Wind power is the conversion of wind energy into a useful form through the use of modern versions of the windmill, wind turbines. Maybe you’ve seen these tall, 3-bladed structures dotting hillsides. Wind power is plentiful, renewable and clean. When it replaces electricity derived from fossil fuels, it reduces greenhouse gas emissions. It can be produced on a large scale and connected to huge electrical grids. It can also create energy on a small scale with individual turbines, providing electricity to isolated locations.

Why then, aren’t wind turbines on every available stretch of wind-blown land in the country? Why aren’t they as familiar to us as the ubiquitous gas stations (and United Methodist churches) on every corner of every big and small town in America? As Thoreau said more than a century ago, “Here is an almost incalculable power at our disposal, yet how trifling the use we make of it! It only serves to turn a few mills, blow a few vessels across the ocean, and a few trivial ends besides. What a poor compliment do we pay to our indefatigable and energetic servant!”

Well, there’s one big problem with wind power – it’s completely unpredictable. It’s wind, after all. It does what it wants, when it wants. The fact that some days are windier than others means that, at this point anyway, we can’t rely on wind power for more than 20 - 30% of our total electrical demand. It’s a limitless, extraordinary source of power that is simply beyond our control.

Which is why it works so well to describe the Spirit of God: a limitless, plentiful, unpredictable, extraordinary source of power that we cannot control. In fact, we can barely understand it.

Nicodemus certainly fails to understand. The scholar and synagogue leader comes to see Jesus under the cover of darkness. He has heard about this remarkable preacher, teacher and healer and wants to learn more, but he can’t bring himself to do it publicly. He can’t even bring himself to ask Jesus a question; when Jesus opens the door Nicodemus simply makes a statement: “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.”

If, implicit in Nicodemus’s statement is really a question, *Who are you?* Jesus avoids giving an answer. As he so often does, he responds instead with what sounds like a non sequiter, a statement that, on first glance, doesn’t correspond with what’s come before it. *Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*

In the Greek language in which this gospel was written, Jesus has told Nicodemus that *no one can see the kingdom of God with being born anothen*. That little word, *anothen*, has two simultaneous meanings. It means "born from above," as today's translation has it, but it also means "born again" or "born anew," the translation that many of us are familiar with. It’s not that one translation is better and the other is secondary; it means both. At the same time. It’s not a mistake; it’s *supposed* to mean both. The meaning is intended to be that rich, that multivalent, that full of expansive possibility.

You can see the trap that Nicodemus falls into. He flattens out the meaning, missing the complexity that Jesus intends, and answers from the surface level only. He focuses on “born again” and considers only its physical aspect. "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Nicodemus is having an Amelia Bedelia experience. You may be familiar with Amelia Bedelia, she’s the heroine of a series of children’s books. But you may not know her at all, so let me introduce her.

Amelia is a maid. We’re not clear on where or when she lived, but we know she is a maid. She wears a black dress with a white apron and a little white maid’s cap. She is employed by Mr. and Mrs. Rogers, for whom she cleans the house, cooks the meals, serves the tea, does yard work, and runs errands. But mainly what Amelia does is make us laugh. She makes us laugh because she mixes us the meanings of words. Here’s an example, from *Amelia Bedelia and the Surprise Shower*:

“Amelia is working for Mr. and Mrs. Rogers helping them get ready for a party. Suddenly, she remembers a forgotten chore. "The fish!" she shouted. "Mr. Rogers told me to scale them and ice them." She piled the fish on the scale. "There," she said, "you just scale yourselves while I ice the cakes." She spread icing on the cupcakes. "They do look nice," she said, "and there's enough icing left to ice the fish." So she picked up a fish by its tail and iced one side and then the other. When she was done, she put the iced fish and the iced cupcakes into the cupboard.” (Amelia Bedelia and the Surprise Shower, Peggy Parish, quoted by B. Lundblad)

In every Amelia Bedelia book that I ever read to one of my children, Mr. Rogers inevitably gets fed up with Amelia’s silly linguistic mistakes and fires her. But then he and Mrs. Rogers miss her cooking, which is much better than her vocabulary, and by the end of the story they welcome her back. Which means we can always look forward to another Amelia Bedelia adventure in which she mistakes one meaning of a word for its different, intended meaning. Just like Nicodemus.

"How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Nicodemus wants to pin Jesus down, but it can’t be done. Jesus didn't literally mean to be born a second time. Nor does Jesus seem to be talking here about a specific salvation moment, as in the question, "When were you born

again?" Instead, Jesus is pointing to the gift of the Spirit, the gift from above, from outside ourselves, from some other source.

Just in case Nicodemus didn't hear, Jesus repeats these words a second time, but this time something changes. "Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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." Now it's time for a couple of our own Amelia Bedelia moments, although we English speakers are justified in missing the nuances and double meanings found in the original Greek of John's Gospel.

When Jesus says a second time, "You must be born from above," the word *you* is no longer singular but plural. In English the word "you" can mean one person or many, but that's not true in Greek. Jesus has moved from talking to one person, Nicodemus, to "you" plural. It's as though Jesus is looking over Nicodemus' shoulder to talk to us now, to all of us, here in this sanctuary. "YOU must be born from above."

"The wind blows where it chooses...." Again, it's only if we know Greek that we catch Jesus' play on words: *pneuma*, the word translated "wind" also means "spirit." The wind blows where it chooses; God's Spirit moves where it chooses. You hear the sound of it, but you can't control it.

You and I must listen for the sound of the wind. We must be attentive, looking beyond ourselves for its signs. We cannot see the wind itself, only its effects: the eerie howling of a storm, the swirling snow, the swaying tree branch; in the summer, the waves of grass in the fields, the leaves on a tree, the cool breeze on the cheek.

Nor can we see the Spirit, only where the Spirit has been. Jesus is the sign of God's wind blowing. In Jesus we see the leaves moving on the tree. Jesus moved in certain directions and not others, directed by the Spirit that came upon him from above.

Rev. Debra Shew says that the process of being born again, being born from above, is the same way. "We can't understand it and we can't control it. It's a mystery, like the wind blowing in--just as Jesus says. It's true of physical birth...and it's true of spiritual birth. Sometimes it's a quick process with little warning and little labor before the birth is complete. And other times, the birth is on its way for some time, but hasn't quite gotten there yet. Or the process gets started, then takes a very long time and a great deal of energy, because birth is always a mystery and always a grace, always something that comes from outside us, always something that comes as gift. We simply have to be ready and waiting. The process of God being born in our lives is a project we never control on our own." [Shew]

Often Jesus' phrase, "being born again," is used as a litmus test, a qualifying exam. Are *you* born again? Are you a *real* Christian? Maybe you've been asked that before. And maybe you are one of those people who can answer *Yes, I've been born again*. Maybe you've had an experience of the birth of God's Spirit in your life that you remember as distinct and very different from the rest of your life.

The Rev. Ward Scovel, a retired United Methodist pastor of the West Michigan Conference had such an experience. Ward's first career was as a salesman. As a husband and father of four young children, his sales territory included three states and he was on the road five days a week. Although he attended church with his family, his wife Mary writes that "he struggled in his religious understanding and doubted the presence of God's love in his life."

“One evening, driving along the highway, he felt such despair that he asked, ‘God if you love me, give me a sign so I might know your presence in my life.’ Suddenly he saw lightning strike off in the distant sky. He was curious but unconvinced. So he said once more, ‘God, if you really love me, you’ll give me another sign when I count to ten.’ He slowly counted to ten and waited, doubting this time that anything would happen. Then he saw a huge bolt of lightening up in the dark sky. Still a doubting Thomas, he said again, ‘God, if you really love me, show me one more time after I count to ten.’ [*I wouldn’t recommend this method of testing God!*] The final number was barely out of his mouth when lightning struck again, and the sky lit up before him.”

“He was so overwhelmed with joy that he began sobbing and shaking uncontrollably. Finally he drove his car off onto the shoulder of the road. He thanked God for answering his prayer. Feeling totally grateful but humbled, he turned the car around and came back home” to tell his wife the good news. Shortly thereafter they moved back to Michigan where Ward finished his college education and, at age 38, began preparing for a life in ministry. [Scovel, p. 25]

But you may never have had an experience of the Spirit's presence. You would feel like a fraud if you said, "I've been born again." Maybe you wonder if this means God loves you less or values you less than those who have “lightning bolt experiences.” Friends, Jesus was not talking about a particular kind of experience when he said “you must be born from above.” His whole point was that the Spirit blows where it will, just like the wind. Its power is limitless but we can’t control it or harness it or insist that act in the same way in every individual’s life.

Rev. Barbara Lundblad writes about the experience of Dr. Joseph Sittler, a well-known Lutheran pastor who taught theology for many years at the University of Chicago. Sittler longed for an experience of the Spirit that eluded him all his life. Once in a sermon, he said, "It is only honest to say that I have never fully known the warm power of the faith for whose declaration I am an ordained minister." He couldn't point to any particular experience of the Spirit in his life, yet he continued to believe. "My duty," he said, "is not to reduce God's message to the size of what I have or have not. It is proper sometimes to declare what one does not know. In obedience to the bigness of God's story which transcends personal apprehension, one may do this." For Pastor Sittler the Spirit was present in God's story told and retold in the wonders of creation, in the words of hymns, in the broken bread. If you can't point to a particular experience of the Spirit, know that you are in good company.

Listen for the wind. Look at the life of Jesus to see where the Spirit has been. Like leaves on a tree, moving in the wind, he followed where the Spirit led. Then he was nailed to a tree. But the story doesn't end on that lifeless tree. As in the beginning, God breathed into lifeless clay and brought Jesus forth from the tomb. And when the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples, he said to them, "Peace be with you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Listen for the sound of the wind. [Lundblad]

Listen for God's Spirit moving in your life, directing your spirit. Be attentive. Be open to the possibility that your experience of the Spirit will be very different than your neighbor's.

The wind blows where it will. You cannot pin it down or explain its coming. It is limitless, plentiful, and unpredictable, an extraordinary source of power that we cannot control. In fact, we can barely understand it.

Let us pray.
Spirit of God, rest upon us and within us even as you rested upon Jesus. Pray for us when our words fail, and surprise us with your presence when we have given up. Spirit of God, be with us this day. Amen. [Lundblad]

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